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GERALD CRANSTON'S LADY :: A ROMANCE

By Gilbert Frankau ::

SECOND EDITION
(Thirtieth thousand).

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IN FRIENDSHIP

THIS, THE UNCENSORED VERSION

OF

"GERALD CRANSTON'S LADY."

GERALD CRANSTON'S LADY

Gerald Cranston's Lady

A Romance

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

ONCE upon a time, and not so very long ago at that, before Major Gerald Cranston, D.S.O., Royal Field Artillery, had transformed himself into Gerald Cranston, Esquire, of Studley Farm, Leicestershire, the Ritz Hotel, Piccadilly, and Pinner's Court, Old Broad Street, E.C., more than one hard-bitten horseman in war-soiled service-kit, sucking disgruntled at his unlit pipe as the six-gun column jolted slow through darkness towards a flash-stabbed horizon, had been wont to remark: "He's a devil about his march-discipline, mate. But give the devil his due! I've been in this blinkin' battery ever since he took over; *and*—facts is facts, mate—though I've seen every kind of hell in it, I've never yet seen the kind that'd put the wind up our Major Gerry."

A similar remark—transmuted into the Scotch of his native Kirkcudbrightshire—ran through the canny mind of Christopher Rennie, sometime the Major's batman and now the Esquire's valet, as, tea-tray in hand, he opened the outer door of Gerald Cranston's first-floor suite on the morning of the day which was to see him married to the Lady Hermione Cosgrave; and realized, with one swift glance at the fanlight over the bedroom door, that his master still slept.

"He's a calm deevil!" thought Christopher Rennie.

With which, he closed the door of the suite behind him; pushed on the light in the exiguous "hall"; set down his tea-tray; and, drawing his silver watch from his pocket, passed into the sitting-room to compare it with the electrically-controlled clock on the white-panelled wall. The watch and the clock synchronised to a second; but, since both agreed that it still lacked a couple of minutes to seven, Christopher Rennie passed back into the hall and waited.

Waiting, he continued—his dour gray-eyed clean-shaven face wrinkling with perplexity—to think about his master.

Certainly, his master was "a calm deevil." An exacting "deevil," too; more Scotch than English, in his precision, in his punctuality. Yet a "deevil" whom, quite apart from his money, one could respect. And, "It was a lucky day for me," thought Christopher Rennie, "when he picked me for his batman—a luckier still when I left the Army to enter his sairvice." Then, with a last look at his watch, he picked up the tea-tray, and tapped three times on the closed door of the bedroom.

At the third tap, a wide-awake decisive voice called the one word, "Come."

§ 2

The man who raised himself slowly from his pillow as Christopher Rennie pushed the control-button of the big alabaster centre-light and poured out the tea, had awakened as though he were still an officer on Active Service, to immediate full-consciousness. His eyes—pale, china-blue eyes with a hint of frosty flame in the pupils of them—shone alert with superabundant health. His close-clipped hair—tawn, touched to auburn where the light caught it—was unruffled as his temper; his hand—the large capable hand which reached for the tea-cup—rock-like in its steadiness. His lips—the two firm lips that, with a terse, "Thanks, Rennie," drained the hot liquid in one steady gulp—shewed healthy as his eyes on a countenance which revealed, even at first glance, decision.

Yet even at first glance, other qualities than decision shewed in Gerald Cranston's countenance. From it—whether one considered the lean jowl, the high forehead, the out-jutting chin, or the prominent cheek-bones—there radiated a force; a driving power; a poised and dominant individualism that bespoke the born leader.

He set down his tea-cup; ordered, terse as ever, "My bath, Rennie"; and rose from bed. One saw, then, that the body of this man matched his countenance. He stood six-foot-two on arched well-shapen feet. His legs were powerful, long in the thigh and a trifle bowed with horsemanship. He had a flat back, a low waist-line, and narrow hips. The plain silk pyjamas, open at the throat, displayed, under a neck whose sinews were muscled cords, a triangle of broad almost hairless chest. The shoulders of that body sloped like an athlete's. The biceps of its either fore-arm might have been a boxer's. One saw, too, when the owner of that body moved towards the bathroom, that—even as an athlete's or a boxer's—every movement of it was under an instinctive control, automatically and amazingly disciplined.

For " discipline ", whether of the body or of the mind, whether of the instincts or of the emotions, whether of himself or of others, was Gerry Cranston's fetish—almost, one might say, his religion : a religion so sternly practised that it entered into every minutest detail of his existence.

Mostly—since he was by temperament an ascetic—this religion of self-discipline applied itself to Gerry Cranston's mind, which now, as he locked himself into the big lavishly-fitted bath-room and picked up his dumb-bells, began, in accordance with its training, to function quite independently of the mere physical routine.

On this, his wedding-morning, the processes of that mind, though more than ordinarily complicated, were as consecutively reasoned, as logical and as coldly detached as ever.

" Marriage," they began, " should mark a definite point in a man's career. Certainly, mine does. On his marriage, a man ought to take stock of himself. Well, I've done that. I know just where I stand ; and just how far I've got to go. Within a thousand or so—reckoning the Cranston Ordinaries at market-price—I'm worth a quarter-of-a-million pounds. That's not enough. Not nearly enough. I want a million at least. Possibly two. That'll only bring in a hundred thousand a year.

" No difficulties there ! Anybody with a disciplined brain can get money. Get it straight, too ! The difficulty is that I want more than money. I want power. The Lord knows why I should want power—it's natural, perhaps, when one feels one can run things. But anyway I *do* want it. I'll get it, too. But that'll take time. Hermione may help me there—though marrying into the old aristocracy doesn't mean much nowadays. It's the new aristocracy, the plutocrats with titles, who run things. I'll have to buy a peerage, I suppose. That'll go against the grain—even out of a couple of millions. Not that I'd grudge the money. Money's only counters. It's the principle of the thing I dislike. . . "

Gerald Cranston put down his dumb-bells, and began his tubbing. Deliberately, he was keeping the personal issue between himself and Hermione out of his thoughts until such time as he had finished his mental stock-taking.

" I've got a few things against me," went on that stock-taking. " Oakham Grammar School isn't Eton, and a corn-chandler's office isn't Oxford. The Eton-and-Oxford crowd are born to power, educated to it. I'm not—yet. That'll come. . . Power's like money. And as dangerous ! One needs self-discipline, self-control to handle it. It must be fun, though, to run

the really big things. Better fun than running a battery. . . That was luck—getting through the war without a scratch. I suppose I *am* lucky. Why shouldn't I be? If a man knows what he wants, if he's got ability and self-discipline, he makes his own luck. Luck's like capital, you can either blue it or invest it. Take Cranston's! If I hadn't persuaded Harold and mother that it was necessary to float Cranston's——"

On that, temporarily, the mental stock-taking ceased. In the as yet half-polished diamond of Gerald Cranston's character were many facets; and two of these, the sentimental and the imaginative, began to glimmer as his thoughts veered to the business which had been the corner-stone of his fortune.

Many investors in the Midlands, and, since the launching of it as a public company, some investors in the South, knew of "Cranston's, Limited; Millers, Forage-contractors and Coal-distributors"; but nobody, not even his brother Harold, knew exactly how much Cranston's, Limited, meant to Gerald Cranston. To him, its chairman, that business stood for a symbol—a symbol of success stamped with his own signature. In his way, and as far as it was yet in him to love, he loved it.

So, as a lover's, his memory harked back to those days, long before the war, long before that double itch for power and money drove him from the Provinces to London, when "Cranston's" had been his whole life; to the day when, leaving school on his father's death, he had found his brother Harold at the head of an almost moribund distributing business; found himself under-nurse to an anæmic baby, to a thing almost bereft of life-blood, with hardly a kick in it.

Eighteen years ago that! And now, the anæmic baby was grown to a lusty giant. Now, the one-time corn-chandlers with their few clients and their fewer carts were a force in the Midlands. Their posters flared from the Wash to the Bristol Channel. Their lorries over-ran half England. For to corn he, Gerald Cranston, had added coal; and to coal, fertilizers; and to fertilizers, farm-machinery. To-day, moreover, thanks to him, Cranston's were no longer mere chandlers. What they sold, they produced—milling their own corn, mixing their own manures, mining their own coal, making their own machinery.

All that had been his own doing. The plans, the plans of which the war-years saw the full fruition, had been all his. And, "Luck?" he thought, "you can't call a thing like that luck, War or no war, the ultimate success was always certain."

The one-time corn-chandler got out of his bath; towelled himself vigorously; lathered his cheeks and shaved them clean

with sure steady strokes of the long-bladed razor. Shaving, sentiment flickered out of him. But for a while, imagination still glimmered. Cranston's, after all, was only the corner-stone, the square-hewn solid corner-stone whereon he meant to rear the edifice of even greater successes. Already, thanks to the capital set free by the flotation of the family business, the walls of that edifice were rising. In imagination, he saw them towering to the financial skies. And, "I must build well," he thought. "I must watch each stone into its place, see each girder set solid in its concrete. Stability! Stability is the test of value, as self-discipline is the test of a man."

Then deliberately as he wiped his razor, Gerald Cranston wiped his mind clean of financial problems; and set himself to consider the stability of that other edifice, the edifice of his marriage.

§ 3

Every diamond, even the finest, has its flaw: every man, even the bravest, his fear; and Gerald Cranston, though Nature had dowered him with a physical courage far beyond the average and a moral courage to match it, had his yellow streak—a fear none the less real because unrealized, none the less vital to any understanding of his character because he himself had never wholly understood it.

This fear (a fear one hesitates to describe as "Fear of Woman", because it was more than that—an apprehension of the mind rather than of the body, a terror lest, loving some woman over-much, he should lose that self-control, that self-discipline on which he so prided himself) lay deep-rooted in every fibre of his brain. Always it had been part of him. Always, not realizing it for fear, he had elated himself when considering the casual women of every man's encounter with a stereotyped: "She suits me—but that's all." So now, his first thought of the woman he had decided to marry was a thankful, "Praise the Lord, there's no question of love between us."

For the War, with its welter of promiscuous sex-gratification, had intensified Gerald Cranston's early fear to an obsession which drove him, even as his ambitions drove him, to detest the very word "love." To him, that word—as understood between man and woman—represented only a danger, a form of madness, a disease that might wreck his career, as it had wrecked the careers of half-a-hundred men he knew. "Man's love for woman," he thought on his wedding-morning, "is either bodily passion escaped from the brain's control, or else a sickly

sentimentality, a single weakness as fatal to success as one flawed girder can be fatal to some great building."

Well, there would be no such flawed girder in the edifice of his marriage to Hermione! Its foundations were firm-concreted on the bed-rock facts of their mutual interest. She needed a husband with money; he, a wife with position. For of course, a man—and more especially a man making his bid for power—needed a wife. The women of casual encounters were unsatisfactory, grasping, dangerous. Wherefore, considering those women with the same cold consecutively-reasoned logic he had employed in the consideration of his financial position, Gerald Cranston dismissed them definitely from his life.

Returning to his bedroom, attiring himself meticulously in the lounge-suit Rennie had laid out for him, his consideration of matrimony continued. On his dressing-table stood a silver-framed photograph of Hermione taken with the boy, with Tony Cosgrave's boy. The child-baronet was fair, with a bonny smile; his mother, dark, serious-eyed, an aristocrat every inch of her.

Dispassionately, Gerald Cranston scrutinized the pair of them. That Hermione had been Cosgrave's wife affected him hardly at all. "A week's war-honeymoon," he thought contemptuously. But that she was the mother of that bonny child moved him a little. "Love!" he thought. "Is that love—to marry, as Cosgrave married, a girl of eighteen, and leave her child unprovided for?"

It was for the child's sake, of course, that she had consented to re-marry. A fine motive! He could respect her for that.

He remembered the first time she had mentioned little Arthur, remembered her saying: "It isn't poverty that I mind for him—it isn't so much that I resent the fact he'll never be able to keep up Cosgrave. It's his education that's worrying me, Mr. Cranston—and his chances. I'd like Tony's son to go to Tony's old school; to join Tony's old Regiment; to be the horseman Tony was, the shot, the fisherman——" That was the one occasion on which she had spoken of her feelings for her first husband. "I loved him," she had said—speaking simply as always. "And he let me down. It wasn't only over money, Mr. Cranston. There had been someone else. A chorus-girl. I found her letters after he died."

How that fitted in with his own picture of Love. Love was an instability—a disease of weak minds—of minds like Sir Anthony Cosgrave's. Lucky for Hermione that Cosgrave had stopped a shell at Ginchy! Love-marriages—had not Hermione

herself agreed with his verdict?—were foredoomed to failure. In the old easy-going days—his mother's days—the love-match might have been possible. But not to-day! Not in this new and poverty-stricken world where each man, each nation needed its utmost effort to survive. The new matrimony must be like the new business—orderly, disciplined, systematized. Their home, his and Hermione's, would be an affair of partnership—the providing for it, his; the running of it, hers.

There would be many children in that home. . . But Cosgrave's child should not suffer on account of them. Cosgrave's child—when his step-father had made those two millions—would be able to keep up Cosgrave. That was not in the bond to which he, Cranston, had set his hand on the day she promised herself to him. Indeed there had been no bond—only his promise: "I'll look after you both, Hermione—after you and the boy."

A bond! A promise! Wasn't his marriage to Hermione, though neither of them had ever put the thing into words, more than either bond or promise? Wasn't it a bargain, a perfectly fair bargain to which he, on his side, brought money, and she, on hers, the potentialities of power? And why not? Better a clean bargain, a business-like orderly marriage, than the uncleanliness, the disorderliness of a love such as Tony Cosgrave's!

Already, as, his dressing finished, Cranston stepped into the sitting-room, *his* benefits from that bargain were apparent. The newspapers to which he always devoted an exact quarter-hour before his eight o'clock breakfast, shewed him—even at first glance—the power-potentialities of his marriage. Here was his photograph, her photograph; there the record of his career, of her lineage. "The Lady Hermione Cosgrave, only daughter of the Earl of Rorkton," he read, "is the widow of Sir Anthony Cosgrave, Bart., of Cosgrave, Lincolnshire. The Rorkton peerage is one of the oldest in England—dating back to before the Restoration."

"That'll make Hermione smile," he thought. Poor Hermione! What was the use of being an Earl's daughter and a baronet's widow—when two sons and the supertax swallowed your father's income, and Tony Cosgrave's white elephant of an unlet entailed estate threatened to encroach even on your four-hundred-a-year jointure? "She, too, benefits from the bargain," went on Gerald Cranston's thoughts.

For a full five minutes, he continued to dally with the papers. Somehow, the various photographs of Hermione annoyed him. It seemed to him that they gave a false impression of her,

darkening the pallor of her complexion, fluffing out the straightness of her hair, making her pretty rather than handsome, stiff rather than dignified. "They don't do her justice," he said to himself —picturing the dignity of her dark eyes, the dignity of her carriage; and again, recalling the dignity of her voice: "She, as I, has her self-discipline, her self-control. . ."

Then, once more automatic in his routine, he turned from the social to the financial columns, and was still deep in market-reports when the waiter brought his frugal breakfast.

§ 4

At eight-fifteen precisely, Christopher Rennie returned to his duties. His master, according to inevitable custom, had finished breakfast, and was lighting the first cigarette of the day.

Rennie drew back the brocaded window-curtains, revealing, through lace *brise-bise*, the dun early-morning dullness of a crisp December day. "Maybe we'll have it sunny for the wedding, sir," he ventured.

Cranston allowed himself one of his rare smiles. Though Rennie's enthusiasm for the wedding left him cold, Rennie's personal interest pleased him. He liked his servants to be devoted. That was one of the qualities for which he paid them their high wages.

An Italian waiter, peremptorily summoned, came to clear away the breakfast things. Meanwhile, the valet waited for his orders.

"I want you to telephone to my mother's," said Cranston as soon as the waiter was out of the room. "Find out from her maid how she slept; and say I'd like her to telephone me during the morning."

"Vera guid, sir."

"When you've done that—you needn't come back if she's all right—go upstairs to Mr. Harold's room—it's number four-fifty-five on the third floor—and tell him I shall be working till half-past nine. Make him understand that I don't want to be disturbed till then."

"Vera guid, sir."

"And tell the hall-porter that I'm expecting Mr. Tillotson at half-past eight. When he comes, he's to be shewn straight up here. Mr. John Hardcastle is calling at ten. He can come up, too. Any other visitors are to send up their cards. Is that clear?"

"Pairfectly, sir." Christopher Rennie, memorizing these

instructions, hesitated a moment before asking: "What time shall you dress, sir?"

"Twelve o'clock, sharp. Mr. Harold will take lunch with me. Here. At twelve-forty-five. Tell the head-waiter it's to be a light meal. Get on to Lees at the garage; remind him that he's to bring the Rolls to the Arlington Street entrance. One-thirty, sharp! Havers is fetching my mother in the Clement-Talbot. You needn't say anything about that. I told Havers myself—last night. And, Rennie——"

"Yes, sir?"

"There'll be a seat for you at the back of the church. You'll find the ticket for it on my dressing-table. Lees'll pick you up here after he's taken us on, and bring you to Rorkton House. Don't forget to bring my kit-bag with you. And tell the luggage-porter he's not to be later than three forty-five at St. Pancras. Mr. Harold will be there. In case he's late, the porter can register the trunks to Oakham. That's all. You can go."

The valet disappeared. Cranston, extinguishing his cigarette, stepped to the windows; opened them, and passed out on to his balcony, below which, deep as a cañon, ran Piccadilly.

Already, even as Rennie had predicted, a lemon-coloured sun peeped up through the dissolving cloud-films. The leafless trees of Green Park were faintly rimed with hoar-frost. Revelling in the strength of his lungs, Gerald Cranston breathed deep of the frosty air. Now, once again, as his blue eyes looked out over Piccadilly, beyond Devonshire House to the roofs of Mayfair, imagination flickered up in him. Among those roofs, in Aldford Street, should be his own roof-tree. And from under that roof-tree, he would conquer this London. "Our home," thought Gerald Cranston. "Mine—and Hermione's. An orderly home—disciplined. Yes—I'll buy the place—to-day."

A knock on the sitting-room door disturbed concentration; and turning back from the window with the usual "Come!" on his lips, he found Tillotson, his confidential secretary, already in the room.

Stanley Tillotson was a dapper little man of the ex-officer type. The brown eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses were alert with intelligence, and his complexion, though a trifle pallid, indicated the stamina necessary to his job; while the lips under his blond tooth-brushed moustache—lips that opened thin above irregular teeth as he gave his chief good-morning—seemed made for the preserving of secrets.

"'Morning, Tillotson." Cranston's voice was curt. "You're three and a half minutes late. Where's the post?"

"In the office, sir." Tillotson knew better than to excuse himself. "I thought I'd see if you wanted anything urgently before I opened the letters."

"There's nothing urgent. I'll be with you in ten minutes."

The secretary limped away, trailing his injured foot; and Cranston, concentrating on him as he went, thought: "Wonder why he resents being here at half-past eight? Womanizes, I expect. That's the trouble with most of them——"

He returned to the balcony; and stood there, arranging his thoughts, for the allotted ten minutes. Then he stepped back; closed the windows with one deft movement of his capable hands; and made his way out of the sitting-room, across the hall of the suite.

The fourth room of that suite had been metamorphosed, at Cranston's expense, into an office. It struck him, as he entered it, that the bass-wood roll-top desk at which Tillotson was seated, the oak typewriter-stand and the plain mahogany table, bare except for its big leather-lined paper-box and its telephone, contrasted rather strangely with the white *carte-en-pierre* wall-decorations, the bronze bracket-lights and the red carpet. "Have to do something better for Aldford Street," he thought, closing the door carefully behind him; and sitting down to his table with a terse, "Ready, Tillotson?"

"In a moment, sir." The secretary slit the last of the many envelopes; inspected its contents; added them to the largest of the three piles of papers in front of him; picked up the three piles; rose, and faced his chief. "About the wedding-stuff, sir," he began, the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Circulars, and that sort of thing. You won't bother with them, I presume?"

"No. Burn the lot. Any bills?"

"About a dozen, sir."

"Read them over, please."

Tillotson detailed the accounts: and Cranston either passed them with a curt, "That's O.K. Pay it," or queried them with a curter, "That's wrong. The price was twenty guineas. Write and tell him so."

This routine over—an unpaid bill was Cranston's pet detestation—there remained some dozen letters, to each of which he devoted a minute's attention. As he indicated his answer to the last of them—"That's a service charity, isn't it? Send 'em a tenner"—the telephone-bell rang; and Tillotson, having answered it, announced: "Mrs. Cranston wishes to speak with you, sir."

Stanley Tillotson, though he had been in Cranston's service

a full year, never failed in his amazement at the change which overcame his employer's crisp business-like voice whenever he spoke with his mother. It changed now, as he handed over the receiver; and listened to the bantering:—

"Hullo, mother, is that you? . . . Up already, eh? . . . That's good. . . Slept like a top? That's better still. . . Listen: I've arranged about your car. It'll be at Phillimore Gardens at a quarter-past one. Don't panic. That'll give you oceans of time. And have a good lunch first. The reception's sure to be a dog-fight. . . Of course, old lady. I arranged that, too. The front pew on the lectern side! And mind you make for the vestry the moment we do."

Cranston, with a quiet smile, replaced the receiver; but when he next spoke, the smile had vanished, and his voice was curter, more business-like than ever.

"Tillotson," he said, "I've decided to buy that house off Park Lane. Fifteen A, Aldford Street. Get on to Trollope's as soon as their office opens. Ask for Mr. Jones. Tell him I'll give him the thirty thousand, provided his client accepts in writing by eleven o'clock this morning. Tell Mr. Jones that if the acceptance is legally binding, I'll pay three thousand deposit at once, and the balance on completion. Write that down; and give me Harrison's report."

Tillotson, from a drawer of the desk, produced the architect's report on Aldford Street; and Cranston, having scrutinized it, went on:—

"Hardcastle's coming at ten o'clock with my will. I'll tell him to send you the deeds. The moment he sends them—before, if he sanctions it—instruct Harrison to send out his specifications for tender. Tell him I want to see the estimates. If I'm still away, he must send them on to me. Make it very clear that the thing's urgent. To-day's the twelfth of December. I've got to be in by the twelfth of March. Tell Harrison to put a penalty clause in his building-contracts. He'll understand what I mean. Got all that?"

"Yes, sir." Tillotson, scribbling hieroglyphic shorthand, never looked up from his notebook, as Cranston's mind switched to a fresh subject.

"About Cosgrave. That's urgent, too. It's an accountant's job. Write to Sir James Guthrie—you know, Guthrie, Jellybrand & Guthrie. Explain that Lady Hermione's solicitors, Poole, Cartwright & Poole, have their instructions to let him have a copy of the estate-accounts. Tell Sir James Guthrie I'd like him to look over them personally; and have one of his clerks

prepare an exact balance-sheet of incomings and outgoings for the last five years, by the end of the week. When it's ready, he's to send it direct to me at Studley Farm."

"Very good, sir." Almost before Tillotson had scribbled his last hieroglyphic, Cranston had switched again.

"And take this telegram, please. 'McManus, Liverpool. Sell my entire holding in Coronation Cotton ordinary and preferred at best price obtainable. No limit. Remit proceeds usual channels.' You'll code that, of course."

The curt business-like voice paused for a moment; and Tillotson, rather diffidently, broke in on its pause: "Excuse me for interrupting, sir. But perhaps you haven't seen the *Financial Times* this morning. There's a 'stop-press' which says Coronations have declared thirty-three-and-a-third-per-cent. for the half-year."

"Thanks." Pleased again—Tillotson, as Rennie, was certainly worth his high wages—Gerald Cranston relaxed very nearly to intimacy. "Thanks. But *I* saw that three-quarters-of-an-hour ago. The thing's either a fake—or worse. I've suspected it for some time. Sorry I ever touched the shares! Get that wire off by nine-forty-five, please. That'll give the Liverpool market just time to boil up. Now go on."

They went on till nine-thirty brought Rennie with the information, "Mr. Harold's waiting in the sitting-room, sir."

§ 5

Except for his height, Gerald Cranston's elder brother Harold, managing director of Cranston's, Limited, resembled him hardly at all. Harold's hair shewed gray against Gerald's tawn, his eyes gray-green against Gerald's blue. He wore a rough bristly moustache on his upper lip, and his lower sagged a little for sign of ill-health. Plump of jowl where Gerald was lean, he had a forehead broad rather than high, puffy good-natured cheeks, and an easy-going dimpled chin. Cheeks and chin did not belie Harold's temperament which, as Gerald entered the sitting-room, and the two clasped hands, further displayed itself in the jocular sentence, "Well—and how's the blushing bridegroom?"

"Busier than his best man, apparently."

"Same old Gerry!" The elder brother's plump, ringless hand patted the younger on the shoulder. "Always overdoing it! Mark my words—one of these days, if you're not deuced careful, you'll have a nervous breakdown. I know *I*

should if I went at things the way you do. I'll have to talk to Lady H.—by the by, do I call her Lady Hermione or just plain Hermione?—about looking after you."

"I shouldn't if I were you, Harry." Though he respected his brother's grasp of business detail, Gerald Cranston considered him, in private respects, rather a fool—pleasant enough as a companion, of course, and loyal to the backbone, but otherwise a sentimentalist, an indisciplinarian, a man with no granite in his make-up; and that lack of granite seemed particularly apparent now, as Harold, obviously a little above himself with the excitement of the occasion, commenced an aimless monologue which began: "Old chap! It's wonderful to think of you and me starting life in the old office at Leicester," and continued, with a wave of the hand round the ornate sitting-room, "to end-up here."

"You're more or less used to all this swank," went on Harold. "I'm not; and I never shall be. Why—the mere idea of being best-man at one of these la-di-da Town weddings absolutely makes me sweat. Honestly, Gerry, if it hadn't been for you and mother making such a point of it, I'd never have come up last night. You'd have got somebody else easily enough. Why on earth didn't you? I'm all right at organizing a mill, or a poster-campaign. But this church stunt has got me beat. Tell me now, the lectern side's yours, isn't it? And the pulpit side's hers. We wait for her in the chancel——"

"Don't fuss, Harry," interpolated the bridegroom. "Of course, the lectern side is ours."

Harold Cranston, however, persisted with his aimless fussing while the bronze hands crawled slowly round the electric clock towards ten. "Marvellous chap, Gerry," he thought, watching his brother's impassive face. "He's got a mind like a calculating machine. Pull the lever, and out comes your answer. He's like a machine altogether. It's jolly difficult to imagine *his* being in love. I suppose he is in love, otherwise he wouldn't be getting married. Jolly good stroke of business, all the same. Pretty woman, too—though she looks more than her age. I suppose she *is* only twenty-five. And he's six-and-thirty. I wonder what she sees in him. Gerry's not a bad-looking chap, and of course he's got a bit of money. Still, you'd have thought *she* could have done better for herself—married one of her own set. . ."

Tillotson, entering with the news that "Mr. Jones is going straight round to see his client, and will take his chance of finding you here on his way back," interrupted Harold's monologue: but not Harold's thoughts.

"Damme," marvelled Harold, when his brother ordered Tillotson, to "let the hall-porter know I'm expecting Mr. Jones," "Gerry's a most remarkable chap. If *I* were getting married within four hours, I shouldn't be able to add up the petty-cash. Let alone buy a house!"

Then Rennie announced, "Mr. John Hardcastle"—and Harold marvelled still further to hear his brother discussing his own will as calmly as though it had been a coal-contract. "Gerry's more than remarkable, he's a perfect phenomenon," mused Gerry's brother as Hardcastle—a short bald-headed little man with a Wellington nose and a face like brown parchment—spread out a thick typed document on the ormolu table, and finally relinquished it with a Parthian, "You understand, Mr. Cranston, that you must defer your signature to this till after the ceremony? Otherwise, it won't be valid."

"Yes. Even I know enough law for that." Mr. Hardcastle's client handed the will over to his brother, saying, "Give me this immediately after the wedding, Harry. You realize, don't you, why I'm leaving things as I am? By rights, I ought to make a settlement on the boy and on my wife. But I can't do it at the moment. It'd tie up too much capital"; and without waiting for his answer, continued: "Mr. Hardcastle, I wonder if you have a moment or so to spare? If so, there's another little matter, a matter of house-property, on which I'd be glad of your opinion. It's like this——"

Mr. Hardcastle obviously had several minutes to spare, and by the time he had spared them, Trollope's Mr. Jones, bearded and in high fettle, arrived, in the company of Tillotson, with a pocketful of papers which Cranston, even at first glance, saw included the receipt for his three thousand deposit.

Whereupon, after a short palaver, the depositor, surrounded by his secretary, his house-agent, and his solicitor, disappeared towards the office, leaving Harold alone.

"Phenomenon or no phenomenon," thought the sentimental Harold, "a bridegroom's a bridegroom; and I'll bet even Gerry gets the wind up when he starts getting into his wedding-togs."

CHAPTER TWO

§ 1

OUTWARDLY, however, even the donning of his wedding-garments failed to disturb Gerald Cranston's composure.

When, at mid-day to the second, he began divesting himself of the blue serge suit in which he had been working, as when, at twelve-thirty-five precisely, he re-appeared in black morning-coat, wing collar, patent-leather boots, white spats and " sponge-bag " trousers, he remained, so far as Harold or Rennie could perceive, utterly unmoved. Eating his lunch and drinking his one whisky-and-soda, he gave rather the impression of a business-man about to meet his co-directors in the City than of a bridegroom about to be united to his bride in St. Margaret's, Westminster. He even attempted to talk business, the business of Cranston's, Limited, over the small but perfect Havanas which followed their meal.

" I've been thinking," he said, " that it wouldn't be a bad scheme if we had a cut at the London retail coal trade. What's your opinion, Harry ? Not that it's much good asking your opinion. Your nerves are all over the shop. For goodness' sake, pull yourself together. What's the trouble now ? "

" That will of yours." Harry had risen. " I left it in my other coat."

" Then let Rennie fetch it. Where's the ring ? "

" Oh, the ring's all right. I've got that here." And Cranston's brother fumbled at the pocket of his white-slipped waistcoat, muttering, " Dash it, Gerry, the next three-quarters-of-an-hour are going to be pretty trying."

" Trying ? " The bridegroom took a last puff at his cigar. " Not if you keep your head."

All the same, as Rennie, having retrieved the will, handed them their hats and gloves, and, with a dutiful, " Lees is waiting at the Arlington Street entrance, sir," escorted them to the lift, even Gerald Cranston knew himself a trifle on edge. Responding to the blue uniformed lift-man's, " I hope I may be allowed

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to offer my good wishes, sir," it came to him that his marriage, in addition to marking a definitive stage in the battle of his career, altered his entire social status. Already, or so it seemed to him, there was a new note in the lift-man's voice, a deferential note which implied, " You aren't only rich *now*, Mr. Cranston. You've a position. You're a somebody."

The one-time corn-chandler was no snob—yet the new note pleased him. In it, he sensed a fresh foretaste of power ; and that sense of foretasted power grew on him when—the lift decanting them in the hall—he saw various people among the usual luncheon-crowd waiting, perfectly politely but perfectly obviously, to catch a glimpse of " that chap Cranston, the fellow who's marrying Lady Hermione Cosgrave." And, " I've got to keep a tight rein on myself," thought " that chap," politely outstaring the polite starers.

The *chef-de-réception* expressed the hope that " We shall see you and Lady Hermione with us after your honeymoon, Mr. Cranston " ; the hall-porter volunteered, " Your car is waiting, sir " ; a page-boy fled to warn the six-foot doorkeeper—and the two brothers passed out of the Ritz, down the steps between two thin lines of London's inevitable gapers, into the waiting Rolls.

" When did you acquire this luxury ? " asked Harold, as Lees let in his clutch and the deep-royal blue Hooper saloon gathered noiseless way down Arlington Street.

" Bought it at the Show."

Cranston subsided into silence. For now, suddenly, he knew a need for all his self-control. Excitement mounted his imagination. His thoughts reared like restive horses against the curb of mental discipline.

But Cranston's thoughts were not of his bride's beauty, sensual ; nor of her position, snobbish. Rather were they personal, triumphant : the thoughts of one who, having accomplished much, realizes himself capable of accomplishing a thousandfold more.

In those thoughts, the past galloped side-by-side with the present : till he saw himself, a gawky hobbledehoy in his ill-tailored provincial clothes, entering the dusty corn-chandler's office for his first day's business. How he had pored, night after night, over the melancholy ledgers of that business ! How inexperienced he had been, and how nervous, on that unforgettable morning when he set out in the rain-drizzle to take train for the colliery whose proprietor was to finance him in his first coal-trading ! How self-conscious he had been—buying horses for his coal-carts ; how anxious when, substituting petrol-

traction for horse-traction, he had begun to reach out over all Leicestershire—and beyond Leicestershire—into Rutland, into the fen-country, into Northampton itself!

Inexperience — nervousness — self-consciousness—anxiety? What had he to do with such emotions—he, Gerald Cranston, who was even now passing St. James's Palace in his own three-thousand-pound motor-car—he, Gerald Cranston, who was about to take his bride from the English peerage?

Then, as his blue eyes gave him a sudden picture of the sentry outside Marlborough House, the past out-galloped the present in the turmoil of his mind. Once again, he knew the thrill of the lost years. Momentarily, he visualized himself—awkward in the unaccustomed khaki—handing over the reins of business to the man at his side, abandoning Cranston's for a greater Service.

How long a service it had been! Four mortal years! How often, during those years, he had cursed himself for a fool! Had he been a fool—he with his capacity for bigger if more humdrum things—to risk his brain, voluntarily, in the hazard of the firing-line? Perhaps! Yet to-day, more than on any other day, he knew a clean pride in that folly.

A growl from his brother steadied Gerald Cranston's galloping thoughts. Emerging from day-dreams, he realized his car, already through Pall Mall, blocked in Trafalgar Square. "Curse it," his brother was growling. "Curse it, we're going to be late."

"Don't be such a fool, Harry. There's oceans of time. It's not twenty to, yet." The voice was the voice of the sometime Gunner-Major; and Harold, wise to the command in it, ceased his growling. Presently the block of motor-buses broke up, and they were off again, past the War Office, down Whitehall.

"That's the new Cenotaph," said Cranston; and he uncovered his head. For the thrill of the old years was still on him—so that, abruptly, this plain monument with its flowers and its flags symbolized his own especial dead, those uncomplaining warriors who had passed out as he bade them. "My men!" he thought, simply as a child; and again, visualizing their haggard faces, "My men!"

But not one of all these swiftly culminating emotions betrayed itself on Gerald Cranston's countenance. To Harold, regarding him as he uncovered, the hat-lifting appeared merest formality. "He's hard," thought the sentimental Harold, "hard as iron"; and when, the Cenotaph passed, Cranston, never batting an eyelash, picked up the speaking-tube to give

his quiet order, " It isn't the door with the awning, Lees. It's to the left, opposite the House of Commons," it seemed to him as though this amazing brother of his were a man bereft of all feeling, a lover incapable of romance.

So they came, each with his own thoughts, into sight of that low gray-towered church which fronts the Abbey ; and saw, high on their left, its clock-hands pointing the quarter, Big Ben.

The day had not failed the promise of early morning. Under Big Ben, Parliament Towers spired sharp brown against a sharp blue sky. Mellow sunshine had vanquished hoar-frost—so that the statued square shone almost with the green of springtime, while beyond it, where the car-procession crawled orderly for the red awning, mounted policemen already shepherded the impatient crowd.

" Idlers ! " thought Gerald Cranston.

Yet the presence of the crowd pleased him—much as the lift-man's deference had pleased. More—it served to stay the turmoil of his nerves ; so that, quickly as it had overcome him, his excitement passed and self-discipline, habit of a life-time, re-asserted itself. Calm now, with that peculiar frozen calmness which serves big men in big issues, he took notice—as the car swung slowly round the green, statued Square—of inessential details : of the fact that the clock over the awning had stopped at five minutes to twelve, of the sun-glint on a policeman's helmet, of a gray-beard with a wooden leg selling matches outside the low-porched East entrance of St. Margaret's.

" Give the old chap something, Harry," he said, as the Rolls stopped ; and Lees, a white wedding-favour at the button-hole of his uniform, sprang from saloon-wheel to saloon-door.

§ 2

Already, as the two tall brothers passed under Caxton's window towards St. Margaret's vestry, they could see, between the gray pillars, where the stained-glass windows turned the gold of slanting sunlight-shafts to emeralds and rubies, little knots of men and women filing right and left into the brown pews. Already as, entering the vestry, they found the lady clerk at her big leather-covered table, organ-music began.

To Harold's imagination, that music preluded a nerve-racking torture. He felt himself, in his own words, " growing hot all over." His hands shook. His mind dithered. But the bridegroom seemed to have no nerves, no imagination. Quietly,

courteously, interestedly, he spoke with the lady clerk, with the gray-haired Canon, her father, with the old verger, with the older vestry-woman. Disciplined always, he appeared to surrender himself without any difficulty to the discipline of these people, in whose creed—as Harold well knew—his faith had never been more than perfunctory. "With your permission, sir," he said to the Canon, "I'd like my brother to ascertain if my mother has arrived."

Harold went out in trepidation, to return whispering, "Yes, mother's there; and I never saw so many people in my life, Gerry"; and a moment or so later, having memorized his final instructions, followed bridegroom and verger out of the vestry into the ruby-slanting sunlight-shafts.

By now, except for the women's hats and an occasional kneeler, St. Margaret's might have been a theatre. From chancel to West Window, the nave shewed row on packed row of curious faces. The north aisle had already filled, and the south was fast filling. Low-voiced chatter mingled decorous with the organ-music as Gerald Cranston rounded the flower-decorated lectern to greet the little, quietly-dressed person with the lined homely face and the tired blue eyes who was his mother.

There was nothing of the actor about that greeting. He did not kiss her. He did not even take her hand. Personal demonstrativeness, whether in public or in private, had never been their habit. In his direct, "So you got here in plenty of time, mother," as in her whispered, "Yes. I was here in time to see you and Harold come in," there sounded no note of surface-emotion. Yet, when the big man in the fashionable wedding-garments bent over that insignificant figure in the front pew, it seemed, and rightly, to the tensed and imaginative Harold, as though from him to her there issued a gruff protective tenderness; and when, at a word from the verger, the big man, straightening himself, stepped deliberately to his allotted place, a little of their tiredness—Harold could see—had gone from those tired blue eyes.

§ 3

Certain moments print themselves indelibly on that ever-moving film which is human memory; and such a moment was Gerald Cranston's as he stood to await his bride. The scene registered sharp as some stereoscopic photograph through the lenses of his brain—shewing him every monument, every brass on the church-walls; every fretted carving of its roof; every

twined garland on its pillars; every figure on its stained-glass windows; every face along its pews. The bulk of those faces, even on his own side—for the bride's friends, out-numbering the groom's, had overflowed from north to south of the church—were hardly known to him. Yet his brain photographed each and every one of them.

They seemed, those unknown faces of Hermione's acquaintances, a little unfriendly, quizzing, speculative. Almost it was as though he could see their lips moving in condemnation of her. "Cranston," those lips seemed to be saying. "Cranston? Why is she marrying Cranston?" So that it was relief to recognize among them the faces of his own acquaintances—his old General's, for instance, soldierly and clear-eyed; Hartigan, his stockbroker's, obviously amused; Harrison's; Sir James Guthrie's; Rennie's even, right at the back there, under the quaint carved figure in the wooden ruff and farthingale.

No unfriendliness there! Nor in the near-by faces of Hermione's two brothers. Their high-moulded faces shewed only a touch of boredom, a mild but unhostile superciliousness. "The Viscount's rather like her," he thought. And so thinking, looked for Hermione's boy. But the boy's face, low in its pew, seemed to elude him. He could see it only as a fluff of yellow hair over a white forehead and two wistful-serious brown eyes.

It was at that moment, just before the preliminary organ-music ceased and the first chime of Big Ben's clock carried down to him through the chancel-window, that Gerald Cranston's brain registered the last of the known countenances—Ibbotsleigh's, the mining-engineer's. Always, prior to that moment—was it not Ibbotsleigh who had introduced him to Hermione?—that countenance, despite its dandyism and the black arrogant upcurl of its moustaches, had been friendly enough. Why then, to-day, should its black eyes be hard as agates, its thin lips tensed to condemnation above its cleft chin?

The questions were automatic, danger-signals of a mind trained to deal instanter with the minds of its fellow-men; but even as Gerald Cranston's brain was asking them, the film of memory clicked away the picture; Big Ben's second chime cleft down to him through the chancel-window; music recommenced; the verger whispered; boys' voices mingled with the music; and, as known with unknown faces turned away towards the north door, he knew Hermione and her father at hand. A moment later, the music and the voices swelling loud to greet her, they were in the aisle.

He could see, while the pair of them were yet half the nave

away, that Hermione was no paler than her wont ; that neither on her face nor in her bearing, shewed any trace of emotion. Her step, in its deliberateness, might have been his own. Her clothes, to his inexperience, seemed of the simplest ; some silver-gold tissue that accentuated the tallness and the slimness of her.

Closer she came, and closer. Now, under the silver-gold of the hat with its draped-back veil, he could see her hair, coroneted smooth and dark above the broad white forehead. Her eyes, too, were dark—dark as English violets.

Closer she came, and closer. Now she was almost at his side. Now, his nostrils caught the faint sweet scent of her. Now his eyes gave him her full picture—hardly beautiful, yet all appeal. But his eyes, as his heart, rejected the appeal of her —realizing only her dignity, her resemblance to the tall gray-haired high-featured aristocrat against the black of whose sleeve her hand, small yet capable as his own, shewed pale-gloved and untrembling.

How alike they were, those two—the old man, broad-shouldered still, on his long unbending limbs, and the young woman with the straight high nose, the dimpled chin and the clean-cut softly-curving lips !

The bridal-hymn ceased as the pair reached him ; the verger whispered a word ; and turning, Gerald Cranston faced the priest. His mind was still calm with that peculiar frozen calmness. Memory's film still registered its pictures—the purple robes of the Canon, the markered book in his hands, the black-and-yellow tessellation of the chancel-paving, the altar-flowers, the Calvary window, and the two soiled flags hanging either side of it. But now words registered with the pictures.

" Dearly beloved," began those words, " we are gathered together here in the sight of God . . . to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honourable estate . . . not by any to be enterprised unadvisedly."

The words flowed on ; till for a moment—the impressiveness of them ousting all else from his mind—it seemed to Gerald Cranston as though here, in the opening of the Church of England's service, he had found actual confirmation of the morning's theorizing. Marriage—agreed this Church of his perfunctory allegiance—was not to be enterprised unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites. Marriage —agreed this Church—was ordained for the procreation of children. How those words tallied with his own theories ! Glancing sideways at Hermione, he wondered if she, too, were weighing them.

But Hermione's face might have been a mask; and looking on that mask, speculating on the thoughts behind it, the words lost their impressiveness for him. . .

Till gradually his mind stiffened against the words.

The words, however, flowed on. "Wilt thou, Gerald, have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance. . . Wilt thou love her? . . ."

"I will," answered Gerald Cranston. Yet now, on a sudden, every fibre of him denied the ritual. "Love," he thought. "What have we to do with love—Hermione and I—man and woman of this new world where each hour brings its fresh problem, each day its renewal of the struggle for existence? Let the Church preach order, discipline, system—the strength of men and women, not their bodily passions, not their sickly sentimentalities. . . "

And as the ritual continued; as Hermione's voice, too, answered with his own calmness, "I will"; as the Earl gave her over to the priest; and the priest, their troths plighted, whispered, "The ring now"—his mind, stiffening yet further, threw off even its perfunctory allegiance to this Church which bade him love.

"Ceremony!" he thought, watching the ring glitter on the book. "What are ceremonies to me? My word is my bond. I need neither Church nor priest to seal my bargains."

Then the priest handed him the ring, and began: "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship. . ."

But even as his fingers touched Hermione's, even as he repeated those words which should make them man and wife, Gerald Cranston's subconscious mind reacted to its own especial fear, to that apprehension which forbade him surrender himself in love to any woman—and that fear, none the less real because he might not yet realize it, was still on him when, a moment later, they passed side-by-side across the tessellated chancel-paving to kneel, man and wife, before St. Margaret's altar.

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

THE Lady Hermione Cranston, bride of little more than a fortnight, swathed her tall blue-habited figure in the fur cloak which Havers held out to her; and stood for a while in quiet contemplation of the tail of the Cottesmore Hunt—her husband among them—jig-jogging white-and-scarlet up that short hill which leads alongside Laxton's Covert towards Melton Mowbray. Then, tired from the morning's unaccustomed gallop, she mounted to the rear seat of the Clement-Talbot; let Havers wrap the carriage rug about her knees; and told him, "Home!"

As the big car gathered speed past the cross-roads and headed purring for Whissendine village, two grooms eyed it with the curiosity of their kind.

"Who's that?" asked the one of them. "Yankee?"

"Yankee!" laughed the other. "Not much. That's old Rorkton's daughter. Her that got married the other day. Not done so bad for herself, has she?"

Hermione, already three hundred yards away, did not overhear the comment; yet, momentarily, her thoughts ran almost parallel to it. After years of comparative poverty, years during which anxiety for her own and her boy's future had etched itself deep and deeper into the surface of her young mentality, it seemed strange to lean back in one's own car and realize the perpetual pettyfogging nag of material considerations forever silenced. "Arthur," she thought in that moment, "is safe—safe."

The thought of Arthur's safety was very pleasant; and as the car purred on, slowing through Whissendine, gathering speed once more when they rounded the red Methodist chapel and climbed past the windmill towards open country, her mind repeated it.

"Arthur's safe," repeated Hermione's mind; and then, "We're both of us safe—safe for all time!"

But at that second thought, the violet eyes darkened doubtful under the hunting-veil, and the faintest smile of self-bewilderment crinkled the scarlet of her lips. "Is that why I married Gerald?" she asked herself; and again, "Were those my only reasons?"

For nearly half-a-mile she tried to puzzle out the complex motives which had driven her into this second marriage; till suddenly her habitual sense of humour, that curious capacity for inward fun which had alone enabled her to withstand the stresses of the recent years, reasserted its control; and—the catchwords "Safety First!" formulating themselves whimsically in her brain—she dismissed introspection with a laugh, to resume her contemplation of the countryside.

The car swung on—revealing, with each switch-back of the road, fresh vistas of rolling ridged-and-furrowed green. This Leicestershire was Hermione's own county. In the old days she had known every fence, every field and furrow of it. So that now, even as the thought of financial safety seemed pleasant, so did it seem pleasant to recognise each familiar landmark—each memoried gateway, each patch of brown coppice, each lane-turning and each farm-roof that appeared and disappeared past the hunched shoulders of her uniformed chauffeur and the hurrying windows of her homing car.

On they came, and on—those landmarks. Here was Wild's Lodge, there the blind corner into the Melton Turnpike; here Little Dalby Hall, and there Little Dalby church-spire, wood-embowered on its cone of hill-slope against the pearl-bloom of the winter sky. Presently, Little Dalby streaked away behind the streaking wheels. Presently, leaning forward, Hermione could see the newly masonried chimneys of that gray-brown farmhouse which her husband had converted, barely a year ago, into his modest "hunting-box."

§ 2

Studley "Farm" stands high on a grassland terrace. Behind it, ridge and furrow upsweep green to the dark hog's-back of Studley Wood; either side of which, barred with the gray of timber fences and the brown of "cuts-and-laids," flow the pastures of Studley Vale.

Up the stony road to that grassland terrace, Havers, careful for his tyres, eased the Clement-Talbot to the pace of a slow-trotting horse. A labourer touched his cap; and Hermione vouchsafed him a feudal smile.

"Gate's open, m'lady," he called to them.

They passed the open pasture-gate; and so came to the newly-painted main gate of the Farm. That, too, stood open; and beyond it, midway of the short drive which leads to the low double-fronted house, Hermione saw one of her husband's light coal-lorries. The lorry-man, as the labourer, touched his cap. But this time, answering the salute, her sense of humour got the better of her feudal instincts. "I've married a coal merchant," she thought suddenly.

The lorry made for the stable archway; her car stopped; Havers sprang from the wheel to assist her alighting; Rennie's dour, clean-shaven face appeared at the opening door; and a moment later Hermione found herself in the little newly panelled hall, letting Syrett divest her of furs, hat and hunting-veil, while she warmed her hands before the red fire in the red-tiled hearth.

"I'd like something to eat," pronounced Hermione.

"Very well, your ladyship."

The gray-haired, aquiline-nosed Syrett, who, both as lady's maid and old retainer of the Rorkton family, had already assumed command of the domestic situation, disappeared kitchenwards. Hermione, drawing off her "string" gloves, glanced round the hall. How spick and span the place looked; how rigid, how unhomely in its spick-and-spanness! The very foliage in the vases on the high embrasured window-ledges seemed to have taken on that quality of discipline which—as she already realised—was her new husband's fetish.

"Luncheon is served, your ladyship," murmured Rennie.

The dining room, for all its comfort, offended her taste even more than the hall. Eating her food, she fell to comparing its oak and its cretonne with one of those hotels which ape the "country home." In that hotel, she, Hermione Cranston, seemed an intruding stranger.

"I *am* a stranger," she thought, toying with the unnecessary dessert; "a stranger in a strange land."

Yet the strange land held its compensations. Lapped thus in the ease of money, one had at least the leisure for introspection; and after a while, as she lit her cigarette from the match that Rennie proffered, the Lady Hermione Cranston took advantage of that leisure, abandoning herself to reverie.

Vaguely, in that reverie, she re-lived the days and the nights which had followed that bewildering moment when, in the crowded vestry of St. Margaret's, she had first realized herself Gerald Cranston's wife. Gerald Cranston's wife! Then, as now, the realization seemed incredible. Then, as now, nearly

all the subsequent incidents of her second marriage-day had been mere blurs of sensation, pictures of unreality.

Yet now, as then, one picture, one sensation—their honeymoon journey to Oakham—was real enough. She could still see the full platform of St. Pancras Station, and the open door of the compartment into which Gerald had followed her; could still see herself, outwardly calm yet inwardly a little fearful, leaning back against the cushion Syrett had arranged for her, as the emptying platform slid away from their sliding windows; could still see under the gray hat-brim in the opposite corner, the big blue-eyed countenance of the commoner who was her husband. Sharply in her reverie, Hermione remembered scrutinizing that big calm countenance; sharply she remembered her panic lest, by some last horrible mischance, her scrutiny should reveal, in those serious blue eyes, some light of passion akin to that light which she had seen long and long ago in Tony's.

But neither then nor thereafter had those blue eyes betrayed the light she dreaded. There were elemental passions in this new man of hers, but at least they were controlled passions. And for that, all through those first fastidious honeymoon days, her gratitude had gone out to him.

Nevertheless, even in her gratitude, Hermione could not quite avoid being aware of the tremendous gulf which separated this second marriage from her first. "Water and wine," she thought; "and the wine a mocker."

And at that, sitting there alone in the bright, tasteless dining-room, her high clean-cut features reddened as with shame. Desperately, she strove to put away the memory of Tony Cosgrave, and of all that she had made herself for him in those few crazy leave-days when she had imagined herself his only need. Desperately, she strove to banish those visions in which she saw herself surrendering her rose-white girlhood to one whose every kiss had been a lie, whose very hand-clasp had been a betrayal of the confidences she whispered to him.

She had loved—and he had . . . cheated. Those lips which sucked away her maiden sweetness, had been the lips of a liar; those fondling fingers, the fingers of a libertine. Yes—a libertine! Arthur's father, the man to whom she had surrendered body and soul in utter self-forgetfulness, had cared nothing for her self-surrender. While her eyes were yet weeping for his departure, he had consoled himself—consoled himself with another woman—with the woman whose letter had been found on him when he died.

"Faugh!" thought Hermione.

A coal, dropping from hob to hearth, startled her. Rising to replace it, she felt her hands trembling. She could see, in the mirror over the mantelpiece, that the blood had ebbed from her cheeks. "Fool!" she said to herself. "Fool!"

For what was man's love, but bodily passion transferable at man's caprice from one female to another? Surely woman's life should be dedicate to finer, worthier motives than mere self-submission to man's caprices—to care for her offspring, and care for her home, and care for Beauty, such as the beauty of this green English countryside?

Slowly, on that last thought, the blood flowed back to Hermione's pale cheeks; slowly, her eyes turning to the country picture beyond the leaded window of the dining room, she abandoned introspection. Far away on the sloped background of that picture she could see the scarlet of a hunting-coat, and a gray horse trotting carefully along the stony road towards the pasture-gates. For a while, speculating idly as to their identity, she watched horse and rider. Then, suddenly, as the scarlet-clad horseman leaned forward to knock the pasture-gates open with his hunting whip, she recognised them. "Gordon!" she thought. "Gordon Ibbotsleigh."

The pasture-gate swung to; and the big gray trotted on for the Farm. It did not seem strange to her—knowing Ibbotsleigh—that he should call thus unceremoniously. On the contrary, it seemed fitting that the man who had introduced her to Gerald should be the first person to break the solitude of their honey-moon-time. Yet—to one who knew Gordon Ibbotsleigh's slap-dash impetuousness—it did seem strange that he should draw irresolute rein and halt hesitant at the main gate, that he should eye the place as though undecided whether to enter or no.

Finally, however, Ibbotsleigh appeared to make up his mind; for the gray horse breasted open the unlatched gate, and, pushing his way through, began to walk slowly up the drive. Hermione could see, as the pair of them came on, that Gordon's horse had been hard-ridden. Thorn-pricks blooded its gray belly. Drying foam flecked its long-cheeked hunting-curb. Its head drooped; and its nostrils steamed in the cold air.

But Gordon—though his big spurs, his mahogany-topped boots, his white breeches and even the red of his coat, were dirt-mired—shewed never a sign of weariness. The stock round his wiry throat might have been newly tied. The silk hat, perched arrogant above the dandified face—dark-eyed and cleft of chin, black moustache upcurled from thin lips—gleamed, as though fresh from the iron, on its short scarlet hunting-string. Laughing

as she opened the window to wave him welcome, Hermione noted that he had changed the dirtied gloves under his off saddle-flap for the clean white ones on his lean hands.

He acknowledged her welcome with a lift of his hat; pointed his white-thonged whip towards the stable-archway, and disappeared. Still laughing at the changed gloves—for Gordon's dandyism was a by-word—Hermione rang the bell, and ordered Rennie to set whisky and syphon on the hall table.

§ 3

"Hallo, Gordon."

"Hallo, Hermione." For a moment, as she greeted him and their hands met, Ibbotsleigh's black eyes took their fill of Gerald Cranston's lady. To him, she was all beautiful, all appeal. Ever since her wedding, he had been thinking of her, wondering if she were happy, wondering how soon he dare visit her. Then as, greetings over, she bade him be seated in her husband's hall, his eyes veiled themselves under dark lashes; and he knew himself—for the first time in his impetuous life—tongue-tied and ill at ease. She asked—and for him her low modulated voice held a new, unremembered thrill—whether he had found rugs for his horse, whether he would like a drink, whether he had had a good day's hunting. He answered her:—

"Thanks. The nag'll be all right for half-an-hour. I'll take a peg if I may. You don't mind my calling to—er—congratulate? I've been out with the Quorn. We killed half-an-hour ago. At the Spinneys. It seemed a good opportunity to—er—pay one's respects. You've been out, I see."

For a full five minutes they talked hunting. Her friend's attitude puzzled Hermione. He seemed weirdly aloof—uncertain of himself. Even his, "Well, how's the boy?" sounded forced.

She answered his question gaily enough: "Thanks. The boy's at Rorkton House." Nevertheless it was a relief when Rennie brought the drink; and Gordon, apologising for the state of his boots, sat down by the fire.

Taking the opposite chair, she chaffed him about his remissness in not inquiring after her husband; "As a caller, Gordon, that's one of your first duties."

"My dear girl"—a little of the man's old self-possession seemed to return—"what's the use of asking after a chap like Cranston? The Gerald Cranstons of this world don't require congratulatory callers. They can get on without congratulations—or sympathy. That's one of the main advantages of being rich."

The words grated, but Hermione was hardly conscious of their grating. Gordon Ibbotsleigh had been Cosgrave's intimate crony. For years, ever since her first marriage, she had been friendly with him. For years she had, as she thought, understood his curious cynicism, his curious temperamental violences, which, at times, amounted almost to mania.

"Please apologise, Gordon," she said, quietly.

"Sorry." He drained his whisky-and-soda. "How *is* the great Gerald Cranston?"

"Very well indeed, thanks." She laughed, play-actresswise. "And the great Gordon Ibbotsleigh?"

"Broken-hearted, of course." The grating note went out of his voice; and for a sentence or so they chaffed on—decorously, after the fashion of intimates. Looking at him, Hermione knew pleasure. Gordon Ibbotsleigh was a man of her own world. His thin compressed lips spoke her own language. If his eyes, black-browed above the eagle nose and the sallow weather-beaten cheeks, were a trifle arrogant, it was only with the arrogance of birth, the self-certainty of education.

"Being a millionairess suits you," he said, quizzing her.

"I'm not a millionairess."

"No, but you soon will be." He crossed his booted legs, and for a moment sat speechless, his dark pupils refracting the red fire-glow. Then, slowly, half to himself and half to her, he went on: "You were right to marry Cranston. A good-looking woman's a fool if she doesn't marry someone with money."

"Aren't you being rather impertinent, Gordon?" Hermione's cheeks flushed.

"Possibly!" He still spoke slowly, more to himself than to her. "Truth's always impertinent. Besides—as Tony's friend, I'm a privileged person."

"I'd rather you didn't talk of Tony." Again, Hermione's cheeks reddened; and with an effort, Ibbotsleigh controlled himself.

"Anyway," he continued, "it's a grand marriage for the boy; and I only hope *you'll* be happy. That was why I came to-day—to wish you every happiness."

Gordon's change of mood, his reference to little Arthur affected Hermione. She realized, and for the first time, how much—as a pal, of course—merely as a pal—he cared for her.

"It's nice of you to have come," she answered. "I'm glad you're the first——"

"Are you?" His eyes lifted to her face, and a little of the old cynicism flashed in them. "Are you really glad?

I doubt it. One's women-friends, when they marry, haven't usually got much more use for one."

"Romances of a broken-hearted bachelor!" laughed Hermione.

"No." Gordon's lips were set. "Just common-sense."

"Common nonsense!" Hermione laughed again. "What difference can my marriage make to our," she hesitated ever so slightly over the word, "friendship?"

"You promise it shall make no difference?" Impetuously, Gordon rose to his booted feet and stared down at her across the glow of the fire.

"You promise?" he repeated. "You promise me continuance of our friendship?"

"Of course." She, too, rose—faintly uncomfortable at the suggestion of over-intimacy; and for a moment they faced one another in silence. Then, once more the cynic, Gordon held out his lean hand with a smiled: "I'll take my *congé* on that, if you don't mind"; and picking up his whip, prepared for departure.

"Tell Cranston I'm sorry I missed him;" he went on, as Hermione, still faintly uncomfortable, clicked up the lights and rang to order his horse. But almost before the words were out of his mouth, Hermione, hearing the scrunch of car-wheels up the drive, retorted: "You haven't missed him, Gordon. Here he is!"

His hostess's voice sounded utterly unperturbed; to Ibbotsleigh, however, the arrival of Cranston was something more than a mere annoyance. There had been moments—ever since that first uncontrollable moment on Hermione's wedding-day—when he had caught himself hating Cranston . . . But the meeting was now inevitable; and as the car-wheels scrunched nearer, as they ceased their scrunching, he braced himself to cope with it.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

HERMIONE, explaining the chance of Ibbotsleigh's visit to her husband, could not help contrasting the two scarlet-coated men. In demeanour they were identical—polite, if a shade under the effusive. But there, the likeness ended. Though Gordon stood nearly six foot, her husband seemed to overtop him by inches. In every way, too, her husband looked the broader, the more powerful. He had, as it were, a presence before which the other's lean wiry frame shrank to littleness. Taking advantage of her opportunity she bade her guest goodbye, and went upstairs to her bath.

Left alone, the pair, still standing, fell into desultory conversation.

"Had a good day, Cranston?"

"Not bad, and you?"

"Oh, pretty fair."

"I suppose Hermione told you that you're our first visitor."

"Yes." Ibbotsleigh tapped his mired boots. "I happened to be in the neighbourhood and," casually, "of course I couldn't resist the temptation of calling."

"Well," Cranston's tone sounded equally casual, "let's tempt you again. Have a drink."

"Thanks, I've had one."

"Have another."

Ibbotsleigh would have continued to refuse. Though the meeting had turned out less difficult than anticipated, he felt awkward—an intruder anxious to depart. But Cranston's blue eyes were on him, appraising him; and finally he yielded with a reluctant: "Just a spot, then. But I mustn't stay more than a minute or so; or the nag'll be getting cold."

"Say when!" Cranston's tone, as he poured the two drinks with a firm hand, continued casual; but his blue eyes still appraised their man. Vaguely his intuition realized itself puzzled. Vaguely he remembered that, somewhere, somehow,

his brain had registered an impression, a scrap of private knowledge about this unexpected guest. Yet though—much as a girl racks an office-file for a missing letter—he racked his brain for trace of that missing impression, he could not recapture it. Momentarily the scrap of private knowledge, whatever it might be, had vanished. "Seems a pleasant enough sort of fellow," he decided, finishing his unobtrusive scrutiny and lifting his glass with a quiet: "Well—here's the best."

"The same to you." Gordon Ibbotsleigh tossed off half of his drink; and continued to make conversation.

"By the way, aren't you a mining engineer?" asked Cranston, at a pause in their talk.

"More or less." Ibbotsleigh nodded. "I rather specialise in tin."

"Tin's hardly in my line of country." The other spoke slowly—a sign that he was interested. "I know a certain amount about oil; and coal, of course, is more or less my stock-in-trade."

"Tin's more like coal than oil," said Ibbotsleigh. "As a speculation, the general public aren't interested in it. They don't even know the difference between rock and alluvial. I often wish I'd specialised in something more popular—gold for instance."

"Still"—Cranston spoke slower than ever—"there must be profits in tin."

"And losses." Ibbotsleigh laughed, a soured cynical laugh. "I ought to know. I've dropped two fortunes over it. One in West Africa—and one in the Federated Malay States."

"Really."

They talked tin-mining for a further five minutes. After which, the visitor took himself off.

"Got brains, that fellow," mused Cranston, watching the gray disappear into the gathering darkness; and—his mind once again searching vainly for its lost impression—turned back into the house.

§ 2

"Your tea's in the drawing room, sir," reminded Rennie, "and I've put your letters with it. The post came a while back."

"Thanks, Rennie. Where's her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship sent a message to say she was having tea in her bedroom, sir."

Her ladyship's husband rid himself of his hat; and, passing slowly through the hall, dismissed Ibbotsleigh from his thoughts.

The long day's fox-hunting had scarcely tired his muscles. Pouring his tea from the modern silver teapot, he looked back on his sport in his usual deliberate way. They had killed in the morning. They ought to have killed in the afternoon. His first horse, the new brown, had gone well; his second, the new bay, badly.

Then, in the same way as his mind had dismissed Ibbotsleigh, it dismissed fox-hunting. He poured himself a second sugarless cup of tea; finished the cakes, the bread-and-butter; and turned to his correspondence. The big linen-lined envelope on top of the pile contained Tillotson's daily budget. According to custom, he dealt with that first—slitting the envelope with a table-knife; pulling out the various typewritten documents; sorting them and studying them one by one.

Studying, his brain concentrated; so that his eyes were no longer conscious of their immediate surroundings—of the rigidly furnished room, or the hunting prints on the white walls, or the coloured cretonnes of the upholstery.

He scribbled a note or so on the first portion of Tillotson's report; and turned to the second, which was headed: "Re your private affairs." This, for the most part, consisted of broker's statements. Since leaving Town, he had telephoned to close various outside speculations—on which the profits, as tabulated by the accurate Tillotson, amounted to the satisfactory sum of £9,782 : 17 : 9. At the very end of these tabulations, however, appeared a memorandum about Coronation Cotton. The memorandum, "Confidential from McManus," ended :—

"You acted wisely in getting out when you did. I don't like to put too much in writing, but as far as I can gather, C.C.'s are hopelessly insolvent. There are ugly rumours on the Exchange, and I shouldn't be surprised if the Board of Trade didn't take up the matter. If so, it may mean prosecution for E. R. S."

"Serve Sedgcumbe right if it does end in a prosecution," thought Cranston, nonchalantly. Then he refolded the papers; re-inserted them in their envelope and ran through the rest of his mail. Two envelopes, whose respective flaps bore the superscriptions, "J. H. Harrison, F.R.I.B.A." and "Guthrie, Guthrie, Jellybrand & Guthrie, Chartered Accountants," he left purposely to the last.

As he toyed with those two envelopes, Gerald Cranston allowed himself a moment's respite from concentration. The

room, so unlike the rooms of his youth ; the silver service on the silver tea-tray ; the sound of a horse pawing the stable-tiles ; but above all the thought that men like Harrison and Guthrie, men at the very top of their professions, should be practically in his employ, stimulated the imagination and the power-lust in him. He thought, not blatantly but as one certain of his own abilities : " This is only the beginning of things—the first rung of the ladder."

Concentrating again, he opened the architect's envelope, and glanced quickly through the covering letter. The estimates enclosed were large, larger than Harrison had anticipated—the lowest of them, Waring & Gillow's, a trifle over twelve thousand pounds.

" Of course, we can save on some items," wrote the architect. " There is really no need for the second lift, or the fourth bath-room. The steam-heating need not, in my opinion, be carried above the second floor. I have provided for double windows throughout, but I am not sure this is really necessary. Needless to say, your instructions that the contract must carry penalty-clauses in case of non-completion do not cheapen the general cost of the suggested alterations."

" No good spoiling the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar," thought Cranston, turning from the letter to the estimates and scrutinizing them item by item. Whereupon, having decided to wire Harrison, " Accept lowest estimate and proceed," he opened the last envelope ; switched his mind to " Cosgrave," and was still deep in the intricate figuring of Sir James Guthrie's exhaustive report when Rennie came to clear away the tea-things and remind him that the stable-clock had just struck seven.

§ 3

All the while he was sluicing and shaving in the white-tiled gleaming-tapped bathroom ; all the while he was dressing in the small mahogany-furnished single-bedded apartment which adjoined it, Gerald Cranston's thoughts busied themselves with the difficult problem of his wife and step-son's inheritance from her first husband. " Difficult business ! " he mused, as he went slowly down the staircase into the hall. " The thing ought to have been got rid of years ago."

Hermione, her dark hair tired smooth about her young forehead, her shoulders pale above the orchid-crimson velvet of a short-skirted dinner frock, joined him with a quiet : " Not late, am I, Gerald ? " and, momentarily, answering her, he wondered

how any woman so obviously well-balanced could have imagined herself in love with Tony Cosgrave. Then, his mind returning to its problem, he went on : " By the way, I've had a letter from Sir James Guthrie. He seems to think the position of ' Cosgrave ' is rather serious. Do you mind if we talk it over after dinner ? You see, nothing can be done without your sanction."

" Of course I don't mind." Hermione's violet eyes displayed only a shadowy interest. " But I warn you, I'm hopelessly stupid about money matters. As a matter of fact, they rather frighten me—— "

" Frighten you ? " To him her words were a greater puzzle than the problem of her estate. " Why on earth should money matters frighten you ? "

" Well "—she hesitated—" money is rather terrifying, especially when one hasn't got any. And even if one has—— "

" Nonsense ! " said Cranston resolutely. " Money's like most other things—horses for instance. Either you master it, or it masters you."

" Dinner's sairved, m'lady," interrupted Rennie.

As, over their adequate meal, Gerald continued his disquisitions about money, it came home with some force to Hermione's criticizing mind, that, so far, their honeymoon-weeks had brought them little or no intimacy of conversation. Gerald —she thought, watching his powerful, serious face across the purple candles of their dinner-table—was still the unknown quantity, a factor impossible to estimate. The men of her own world, Gordon Ibbotsleigh for instance, she could more or less understand. To them, as to her, money meant " something to spend "—a token one exchanged for one's everyday pleasure. Whereas, to this man—or so ran her momentary impressions—money meant " something to make."

The more he talked of money, the more did she realize how much he differed from anyone with whom she had ever come in contact. In his eyes, apparently, money-making was a sport. He regarded it as the men of her own world regarded polo or steeple-chasing.

" It's a ruthless game," he told her, " but the only one really worth playing. Barring the law—and the man who goes outside that is a fool—one makes one's own rules. That's another advantage."

He smiled, and she, misinterpreting the smile, interpolated : " Then it can't be a very straight game."

The smile froze on his clean-shaven lips. " One's got to go straight," he said curtly. " That's the first rule, if one wants

to make a really big fortune. Dishonesty's a poor substitute for brains. And at best it's only a temporary substitute."

"Aren't there any exceptions to that rule?"

"Quite a few." He smiled again. "But I'm not one of them."

"You're ruthless, though. You admitted that."

"It's a ruthless game. Like Nature. She's ruthless enough."

"But men aren't wild beasts?"

"No, they're civilized beasts. That's worse."

His philosophy baffled her even more than his financial knowledge. He believed—he told her—in the survival of the fittest: "Weakest to the wall. You can't get over that."

"And the under-dog?" she asked.

"Has to be treated like any other dog—kindly but with a firm hand."

Hermione found the philosophy a mite repulsive; yet, listening to it, she was conscious for the first time in their short married life of a quickening interest in her new husband's career. She caught herself wondering, vaguely agitated, how far his obvious determination might carry him, carry them both. But though her wondering was faintly personal, her interest in Gerald was purely detached.

They finished their coffee; and—asking her permission before he lit his small cigar—he followed her across the hall into the drawing room. There, without more ado, he pulled Sir James Guthrie's report from the pocket of his smoking jacket; and, seating himself opposite to her chair, started in to discuss it with her.

"As I see it," he began, much as though she had been one of his business associates, "to put 'Cosgrave' on a paying basis is going to be rather a problem. We can't, certainly, let it. It won't, apparently, help us if we break the entail. We're not allowed to sell what's left of the furniture; and if we took it out so as to avoid paying some of the rates, the cost of warehousing would be at least as much as any saving we could effect. Do you follow me?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid." Hermione wrinkled a puzzled forehead. "Frankly, the whole thing's more or less Greek to me. I did warn you, didn't I, that I was hopeless about money matters"

"You did. But you mustn't be." Her ignorance fretted him a little, though he realized it unassumed. "I'm sorry if I'm harassing you; but, after all, the place is yours, at least till Arthur's twenty-one; and it really is necessary that you should understand something about it. Now look here"—he

laid aside his cigar ; and, rising, spread Guthrie's papers on the little marquetry table by her chair—" these are the incomings, the money you get, and those are the outgoings, the money you spend. What we've got to do, somehow or other, is either to decrease the outgoings, or to increase the incomings. You see that, don't you."

Hermione nodded acquiescence. Ignorant, she was nevertheless no fool ; and as Gerald continued his explanation ; as his brain grew more and more absorbed in the intricacy of Guthrie's figuring, he ceased to fret about her lack of knowledge. That would come. Meanwhile, her enlightenment gave him pleasure.

His pleasure in her, however, as her interest in him, was detached, impersonal—her intelligence and not her physical attractions its cause. When for one moment their hands met on the typewritten documents, he was conscious of no thrill, of no sex-fascination. Neither her perfume, nor the sheen of her bowed head, nor the curve of her handsome shoulders moved him to renew that momentary contact.

All the same, when, with the semblance of a yawn she admitted herself too weary to follow further figuring, and, gathering up the papers he re-seated himself, it intrigued him to speculate about her. Hitherto his thoughts about her had been almost completely superficial. But to-night, they went a little deeper. To-night, for the first time, he recognised—a trifle startled at the recognition—that her personality held some charm.

What that charm might be, however, he could not analyse. It was like a will-o'-the-wisp. Examined through the telescope of that deliberation which he applied to his business problems, it disappeared. Nevertheless, the application of the mental telescope revealed one vital fact—the difference between this woman he had married and those other women who, with the sole exception of his mother, had so far been the limit of his emotional experiences.

Hermione began to read ; and as he continued to watch her, the imaginative faculty gained momentary command of Gerald Cranston. He sought, vainly, to picture her love for her first husband. That this woman should have been " in love "—as he still understood the word—with Anthony Cosgrave or, indeed, with any man, seemed sheerest impossibility. Imagination could not visualize her—her, the aristocrat, whose poise, whose whole emotional balance equalled if it did not surpass his own—abandoning all poise, all balance for that emotional instability, that disease of weak minds, which was love.

He picked up Guthrie's reports again and resumed his study of them : till Hermione, not realizing the tenseness of his concentration, disturbed him with a rustle of folding newspaper, and a deliberate : " Gerald, I've been thinking—— "

" What ? "

" Oh, nothing important." The unaccustomed curtness of his monosyllabic answer irritated her. " I was only thinking that it was hardly fair you should have to bother yourself about my trifles."

" ' Cosgrave's ' not a trifle. And, of course, your affairs are mine. By the way, how would it be if we had a look at the place to-morrow ? That idiot, Guthrie, hasn't sent a plan. He only gives the total acreage."

Gerald's voice was still curt, businesslike ; and Hermione's, " Naturally I'll come if you think I shall be of the slightest assistance," held a touch of sarcasm.

The sarcasm, however, missed its mark ; for her husband, with a quiet, " Good. I'll order the Rolls to be round at ten," bent his eyes once more to his studies ; and after a little while, curiously fearful of again interrupting him, she went upstairs to bed.

§ 4

But next morning, as the Rolls-Royce swung away over the tarmac from Oakham towards Lincolnshire, there was no fear of her husband in Hermione's mind. This man who sat talking by her fur-coated side might not be of her world ; but at least he was helpful ; and interested—far more interested than her legal advisers, or her father when on various occasions she had consulted him—in the problem which had haunted her like a nightmare ever since Tony's death.

" There's mismanagement somewhere," he told her, as Lees, Klaxoning furiously, slackened pace round the dangerous stone-wall turning at Empingham ; " and I mean to get to the bottom of it."

Then he fell silent till they made well-churched Stamford, and beyond Stamford, pale sepia on the undulating skyline, the woods which hid " Cosgrave."

Looking on those woods, all the feudalist rose up in Lady Hermione. This was Arthur's inheritance—the inheritance for sake of which she must strive to bring him up worthy. One day, perhaps—thanks to this man at her side—Arthur would come into his own ; would rule this wide demesne not as his

father had ruled it, but in quiet honour, in orderliness and decency.

The woods loomed close and closer, bright in the winter sunshine. Their car rounded the last blind turning, the last brown curve of unbroken boundary wall; and so reached the high wrought-iron gates. But now, suddenly as it had come on her, the little mood of feudal over-confidence deserted Hermione. "Cosgrave," as all the old things for which "Cosgrave" stood, was out of date, decaying, the last anachronism of her own order. Time's self had betrayed the eagles above those gates. Broken-beaked, they were; and weather-beaten as the rheumy-eyed old woman who, at Lees' hooting, came out from the dilapidated lodge to wrestle ineptly with their rusty fastenings.

At last, the gates swung creaking on their unoiled hinges; and the old woman, recognising her, advanced bobbing and stuttering, to the window of their car.

"M'lady," stuttered the old woman "M'lady! Us didn't know you were coming."

They left her still stammering apologies; and their car gathered bumping way, along a pot-holed gravel road, past the tumble-down home-farm, deserted of cattle as of men. Presently, the gravel-road petered out to a grass-grown cart-track. Presently, they reached the dim ill-forested larch woods. "Road's pretty bad, sir," said Lees, stopping for a moment.

"Never mind the road. Go on!" ordered Cranston.

They went on—the saloon rocking on its springs—till they made an avenue of unlopped elms, either side of which sloped deer-cropped parklands. At the end of the avenue were other gates, open—and beyond these, "Cosgrave" itself.

The great house of Arthur's inheritance stood vast as the eighteenth century palace of which it was replica, broad and high and massive-pedimented on Italian terraces. But even at first glance its long desertion was apparent. The unpruned roses of the terrace-walls had gone back to tangles of leafless dog-brier; the unweeded flower-beds to graves of dock and twitch. Moss and lichen had eaten deep into pitted statuary and flaking stucco. No water jetted from the bone-dry fountain basins. The twin eagles above the flanking archway, which led to stables capable of housing a cavalry regiment, were time-defaced and weather-beaten as the eagles of the entrance gates.

Yet it was not until they had circled the terraces; not until, leaving the car, they had climbed a giant stairway to stand knocking at the pillared centre-doors whose dark paint was one peeling blister; not until hobnailed boots came noisy across

creaking oak-boards, and a tousle-headed gray-bearded caretaker, stuttering as the lodge-keeper had stuttered, admitted them into cold and musty gloom—that Hermione comprehended the full neglect' the full hopelessness of "Cosgrave."

The house might have been a vault. They wandered, the gray-beard stuttering at their side, through chamber upon gigantic chamber, where plundered wall-spaces betrayed—square by frame-grimed square—how picture after unheirloomed picture had gone to pay the price of Tony Cosgrave's prodigality, and the sheeted furniture loomed ghostlike in the dim rays that filtered through the crazy window-shuttering. They wandered, up a staircase whose marble struck cold through Hermione's thin shoe-soles, down corridor upon dusty corridor, into enormous bedrooms whose curtains hung mildew-tattered from tester-poles of tarnished gilt. Everywhere was dirt, decay, neglect. In the attics, the very floors rotted, and fungus sprouted toad-stool-wise from the mouldering wallpapers. The odour of the whole unventilated place was as the dead odour of a tomb.

At last Gerald finished his inspection; and they came back—the gray-beard still at their side—to the long emptiness of the ballroom. Here, no shutters barred the windows; and through the grime of them Hermione could see yet more terraces, and beyond the terraces, backed by the gloom of yet more larch woods, the gleam and glitter of the home-park lakes.

The caretaker fumbled to open one of the high French casements; and, breathing deep of the grateful sunshine, she followed him and her husband out of doors.

So far, save for an occasional mutter of disapproval, Gerald had hardly spoken. Now, however, he began to talk with the old gray-beard; questioning him with sharp decisive questions; waiting, admirably patient, on his long-winded answers.

Hermione scarcely grasped the purport of those questions. Listless, she stood—now eyeing the house and now the lake below it. To her, as she looked on them, the house seemed all important—the lake and the woods mere scenery. And of what use was scenery? Even this beauty, even this sunshine could not banish the misery which the deserted chambers of Arthur's inheritance had inspired in her.

Gerald and the caretaker talked on; but now their voices blurred and dithered in her listless ears. Her heart ached for the things that might have been, for the dreams that Tony had slain. Arthur, her little Arthur, would never rule this wide demesne; would never walk these terraces on some cool evening of early springtime, when the buds bloomed purple on the

larches and the wild-fowl flighted low towards the quiet mirror of the misted lakes. She, Arthur's mother, would never hear, from out the tangle of these gardens, the merry barking of house-dogs and the sharp prattle of Tony's grandchildren.

Never! All those dreams, and all that other greater dream, the dream of her love for Tony, were dead. Better, then, to bury love, bury all the joys and all the shames of it, here, at "Cosgrave," in the vault that Tony had made of his forefathers' home!

So, as she thought, the Lady Hermione buried her last dream, her last heart-ache; and burying them heard—across their imagined grave—the voice of her new husband.

"I don't quite know what we can do about the house," said Gerald Cranston. "But one thing's certain"—he pointed with his stick across the lakes towards the woods"—and that is that if your agent Fordham had done his plain duty, he'd have turned your loss into a profit more than two years ago. Dash it—any man in his senses knows that you only need a circular saw and an engine for cutting larches into pit-props."

The caretaker had disappeared; and Gerald Cranston's lady, laying her gloved hand on her new husband's powerful fore-arm, smiled up into his serious eyes. "Since I can't love him," ran the thoughts of Gerald Cranston's lady, "the least I can do is to be grateful . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

GERALD CRANSTON'S return to Town—a return duly chronicled in *The Morning Post* —did not alter his early morning routine : so that Hermione, even as she woke lonely in her luxurious apartment to find the hands of her bedside clock pointing eight and the hands of Syrett proffering her chocolate-cup, heard from the near-by sitting-room his terse " Come " to the knocking waiter, followed by the muffled rattle of the dishes on his punctual breakfast-tray. " He's not a man," she thought, propping the pillows behind her shapely back, " he's a mechanism."

Then, her chocolate finished, she began to think about " Cosgrave." The " Cosgrave " episode six weeks since had been typical of Gerald. While she had been sentimentalising about love, scenery, the decay of a proud house and other romanticisms, her " coal-merchant " had been busying, and successfully busying, his brain with the problem of converting scenery into pounds, shillings and pence. While she, one hand on his arm, had been attitudinizing her dutiful gratitude, he—as she suddenly realized—had been deciding to rid her of Fordham.

No sentimentalizing, no attitudinizing there ! Her " coal-merchant " had paid off Fordham, in nominal charge of the estates for the last twenty years, and taken her affairs out of the hands of Poole, Cartwright & Poole, family solicitors to the Cosgraves for the last half-century, with as little compunction as though he had been sacking an unfaithful clerk or a lazy butler. Already, moreover,—she knew though she had not seen—timber-men were marking Cosgrave larches for the axe ; already the last of the Cosgrave deer were gone from the Park ; and already Simmons—that astute ferret of an ex-officer whom Gerald had picked for her new agent—was in treaty with the neighbouring farmers for the letting-out of her pastures.

" Sheer mechanism ! " thought the Lady Hermione, propping smooth cheek on smoother hand. " A calcu*l*ating machine—— "

Syrett, tapping discreetly on the curtained door, disturbed her mistress's musing. "Begging your ladyship's pardon," requested the perturbed Syrett, "but could your ladyship see Mr. Cranston for a moment?"

"Tell Mr. Cranston he can come in in five minutes."

The unusualness of the request startled Hermione even more than it had startled her maid. Before admitting her husband, she demanded her tortoiseshell-backed hand-mirror, a powder-puff, a comb, a peacock-blue bed-jacket, the smoothing of sheets and eiderdown. "I'm not looking so bad, this morning," she thought; and then, amazingly, eyeing her face in the round of the mirror, she saw the faintest of faint blushes suffuse each freshly powdered cheek.

By the time, however, that Syrett admitted her husband, both Hermione's blush, and the thought which prompted it, had subsided. "Gerald," she said lightly, "your early-rising puts me to shame. I feel a perfect criminal not to be up."

"I shouldn't hurry if I were you. It's a beast of a morning." He laughed; and, coming slowly round the brass bedstead, went on: "I'm sorry to worry you at this hour; but I've got a busy day ahead. It's about that dining-room table. Do you think we ought to buy it?"

"It's genuine Chippendale." Hermione spoke slowly. "But the price is awful."

"Never mind the price. These dealers always ask more than they'll take. Is the thing precisely what you've been looking for?"

"Precisely."

"Good. Then that's settled. Now, about the curtains for the drawing room——"

Cranston, one eye on the clock, continued to ask questions for three purposeful minutes; and Hermione, as purposefully answering him, marvelled at the clear rapidity of his mind. "Finance or furniture or forestry," she thought whimsically, "the machine deals faithfully with them all."

All the same when, at half-past eight to the second, he left her room for Tillotson's, the picture of him which remained with her was not a picture of his mental processes. "He dresses well," mused the Lady Hermione, "and, in his rather stern way, he's quite handsome."

Whereupon—realizing herself for the first time since Tony's death still capable of being interested in a man's appearance—she curbed further speculation about the "coal-merchant," and rang hastily for Syrett . . .

§ 2

Meanwhile, the coal-merchant, starting in to dictate rapid-fire instructions to the spectacled Tillotson, had not quite forgotten the attractive picture made by his wife. Consciously, in self-discipline's despite, he remembered the darkness of her hair falling loose over the peacock-blue bed-jacket, a certain quick turn of the head that was characteristic of her when interested, the faint French perfume which she affected.

But three minutes' work sufficed to banish the memory ; and by the time that, at nine o'clock, Tillotson limped after him into the waiting car, Gerald Cranston was his old, super-concentrated pre-marriage self.

" Aldford Street ! " he told Havers (Lees and the Rolls were temporarily allocated to Hermione), " and be sharp about it."

The Clement-Talbot shot forward ; and—Berkeley Street, Berkeley Square, Mount Street and South Audley Street being alike empty of traffic—made " Number Fifteen A." within six minutes. There, punctual as his employer, Harrison the architect, a short clean-shaven bull-dog of a man, already waited under the square stone porch. Behind him, the open front-doors revealed painters in smocks, ladders, pails, paint-drums—the usual higgledy-piggledy of a domicile in the making. From above, came the sharp banging of parquet-layers' hammers, the fret of saws in wood, the intermittent clink of steel on iron-work.

" More trouble," said Harrison laconically ; as his employer, telling Havers to wait, stepped from the car. " The District Surveyor's been round again."

" About that downstairs bath-room ? "

" Yes. We'll either have to scrap it, or re-build the wall."

" Re-build the wall, then. How's the rest of the work going ? "

" Pretty well. You'll look round, I suppose ? "

" Yes." Mr. Harrison's client pulled out his watch. " I've got exactly twenty minutes."

The pair of them, Tillotson at their heels, passed into the house ; through the higgledy-piggledy of the square marble-tessellated hall, into the low westward-aspected dining room, which gave, through double French windows, on to an exiguous Roman garden, bounded by a high ornamental wall from the Lane and the Park.

" My wife's found you a fountain, and a statue," said Cranston. " They'll be delivered to-morrow."

" I'll make a note of that."

Harrison, drawing a stumpy memo-book from the pocket of his overcoat, scribbled a line or so ; and the three of them passed back through the hall into the morning room. Here one of the foremen joined them. " Paint's set well, sir," remarked he, testing the duck's-egg-green and old-gold of the panels with his thumb. " Wish we had a bit more time, though. This weather don't do no good to paint-work."

" You've a full fortnight more," remarked Cranston ; and proceeded on his inspection.

Beyond the morning room, through a door panelled to match its eighteenth-century walls, lay his private sanctum. In the big bay window opposite the fireplace, a silver-badged telephone engineer, busy among his wires, knelt on whitewash-spattered dust-sheets.

" Is that the private line from Pinner's Court ? " Cranston asked him.

" Yes, sir. And this is the extension from the switchboard in the basement."

" Well "—Cranston drew the note-case from his hip-pocket and extracted a couple of pounds—" make a decent job of things."

" Trust me, sir." The silver-badger knelt, bradawl in hand, to his work, as architect and secretary followed the ex-Major of Gunners out of the room and up the main staircase. To both of them—good enough men at their own particular jobs—the ex-Major's general knowledge was an amazement. Here to a plumber or a painter, there to a paper-hanger or a fitter, he spoke as if their especial tasks had been his own. No minutest detail escaped his inspecting eye. He noticed a split runner in the drawing-room parquetry, a chipped mosaic-stone in the wall of a bathroom, a crack in a skirting board, a missing embellishment. " Make 'em put this right," " Make 'em put that right," he kept on saying to Harrison ; and the architect, with a smile at the secretary—for to a professional there is always some humour in a lay man's comments—kept on scribbling cabalistic memos. in his stumpy pocket-book.

Finally, inspection concluded, they returned to the hall.

" And how about money ? " asked Cranston. " Isn't it about time these people had another cheque ? "

" I was just going to speak to you about that." Harrison's bull-dog under-jaw protruded. " In my opinion we've been paying a bit too fast. Provided the work's well forward, they're entitled to another two thousand on the first of March—that's in three days' time. But if I were you I'd hold it back. Make

the penalty-clause an excuse! We don't want them to let us down over the time-limit."

"If they're entitled to the money under their contract," Cranston's tone was enigmatic, "it'll have to be paid—in the same way as they'll have to pay forfeit if they infringe the penalty-clause."

"Just as you like, Mr. Cranston." The architect smiled again. "I'll post you my certificate for the two thousand to-night. Only—if we are a fortnight late, and we can't collect under the penalty clause, because by paying this two thousand we've admitted ourselves satisfied with the progress of the work—don't say I didn't warn you."

"When I said the twelfth of March, I reckoned we'd be lucky if we got through by the twenty-fifth. You needn't, though, mention that to Warings."

Now it was Cranston's turn to smile; and he did so, a trifle more broadly than his wont, as—leaving the bluffed architect staring under the porch—he stepped deliberately to his car through the commencing rain-drizzle.

"Tell him—Pinner's Court," said Gerald Cranston to his obedient secretary.

§ 3

For a moment, leaning back against the Bedford cord upholstery, the Chairman of Cranston's Limited allowed his mind to dwell on Fifteen A. Aldford Street. "Have to give a housewarming once we're in," he thought. Then, according to custom, he dismissed the job done for the job-to-do, and concentrated.

So intensive was that concentration that Tillotson, had he not been wise to his employer's habits, might have thought him smitten with sudden illness. He no longer leaned against the upholstery of the landaulette; but sat bolt upright—his bowler hat thrust back from his fine forehead, his big hands deep in the pockets of his long blue overcoat, his mouth set and the pupils of his blue eyes shrunk to needle-points.

The car—now slowing, now hastening—traversed Oxford Street, Oxford Circus, Tottenham Court Road, Holborn; but still that set mouth made no comment on its progress, and still those blue eyes were blind to the passed and the passing traffic, to the shop-fronts, bright illuminated against fog and rain-drizzle, and the umbrellaed foot-folk on either side.

At last, however, as Havers throttled to speed along the Viaduct, those eyes took cognizance of their whereabouts and

that set mouth opened for speech. "Tillotson!" it said. "Tillotson! Those notes I dictated last night. Are they ready?"

"I have them here, sir." Stanley Tillotson drew up a governmental-looking dispatch-box from between his feet; unlocked it; lifted the lid, and pulled out a dozen sheets of typed foolscap, bound at the side with three brass paper-clips.

"Thanks." Cranston, removing both hands from his overcoat-pockets, took the document, and began to study it—was still studying it when the car made gray Old Broad Street, and, turning left out of Old Broad Street, the big office-building of Pinner's Court. "I'll telephone when you're to fetch me," he told Havers; and, acknowledging a commissionaire's salute with his usual deliberateness, strode—Tillotson, dispatch-case in hand, limping after—through the wide doorway towards the lift.

The lift-porter, also saluting, crashed his gate home—to decant them, after various stoppages, at the very top of the big building, opposite a modest door, on whose frosted glass upper panel there shewed in gilt letters the words: "Cranston's Limited, Leicester. London Offices."

The Lady Hermione's husband, the document still in his hands and his secretary still limping after, pushed his way through that glass door; and with hardly a glance at the half-dozen clerks seated high at the sloped mahogany desks of the outer office, passed into his own sanctum.

As its occupant clicked on the holophane ceiling light, one saw that there was little luxury about this sanctum. Its three narrow windows gave curtainless on to chimneys and the foggy sky. Two of its green-distempered walls were entirely innocent of pictures; while the others contented themselves with a scale-plan of a "Bord and Pillar" colliery working, a blue-print of a corn-mill, and various graphs shewing the weekly fluctuations of flour and coal. A red-and-blue Axminster carpet covered the centre of the hard-wood floor. The furniture consisted of a green leather-covered sofa, four perfectly plain bass-wood chairs, a waste-paper basket, a padded revolving office-chair, and a large flat-topped oak desk, complete with telephone, desk-transmitter and reading-lamp.

Said Gerald Cranston, seating himself at his desk and illuminating the reading-lamp: "Get on with those letters I gave you after breakfast, please. And send Parker here immediately."

A moment later, John Parker—an alert middle-aged man, waxed of moustache and blue-suited, who fulfilled the double

function of secretary to Cranston's, Limited, and second secretary to its chairman—came briskly into the room.

"Good morning, sir," said Parker.

"Morning, Parker." Cranston's eyes were on the document, so that the other saw only the tawny-reddish top of his bent head. "Bring me a copy of the last balance-sheet, the auditors' report on the half-year's trading, and the detailed accounts. Are all the directors coming to the meeting?"

"I fancy so, sir."

"Good."

Parker vanished, to reappear with a thick wad of papers, which he laid on the desk. As soon as the door closed behind him, Cranston, lifting his head for a second or so, began searching among the papers; and, finding what he wanted, resumed study.

But even while his brain absorbed, analyzed, mastered mathematics, that other faculty in him, the imaginative, was at work, so that he saw, as it were behind the written figures, the men and the things of which they were the symbols.

Corn-sowing, he saw—and the wheat sprouting to ear; and his machinery reaping, binding, shocking, winnowing the wheat; and farmers' carts piled high; and the mill-wheels grinding. Nitrate-fields, he saw, rainless in torrid sunshine beyond Iquique; and ships freighting him the nitrates; and the linseed wharves; and presses pulping the linseed for his cattle-cakes. Posters, he saw, huge posters flaring from Wash to Bristol Channel; and lorries; and the men who drove the lorries; and the depots whence the lorries drew their loads; and the shops and the houses and the farmsteads whereto they delivered them.

Then, as brain and eyes concentrated on the papers he had deliberately left till last, imagination changed its pictures.

For neither corn nor farm machinery, neither nitrates nor linseeds, neither its posters nor its lorries, were the life-blood of Cranston's, the black and the boundless energy at heart of this lusty many-limbed giant which its chairman had brought to creation. That life-blood, that black and boundless energy at heart of Gerald Cranston's creation, was Coal. And now, now while the tentacles of his brain fastened on the last of the figures —now while, sum by bewildering sum, he compared, checked, collated them against the words and the figures in the brass-clipped document from Tillotson's dispatch-case—that other faculty in him pictured only the coal-getting.

Shaft-sinking, it pictured—gelignite blasting, and the hammer-drill boring to the "stone-head," and the bricking-ring following

the hammer-drill, and the turbine-pump sinking deep and deeper into the bricking-ring from its wheel-topped headgear. Sunk shafts, it pictured—upcast shafts and downcast shafts, and the cage-chains clanking as the last of the cage-rope reeled to the winding-drum, and the full tubs rising and the empty descending, and the miners' eyes as the cage-doors closed on them. Below ground, it pictured—where the lamps glimmered along the pit-propped galleries, and the disc-machines whirled against the under-cut coal-face, and the shot-firers knelt to stem their charges, and the shot mass toppled, and the colliers broke it, and the putters filled their tubs for the ponies, and the tubs moved endless on the double-tracked haulage-roads. Above ground, it pictured—the engine-house and the pump-men, the dynamos whirring as they drove the ventilating-plant, and the mined coal falling through screen to tippler, and the grimed hands busied at the moving picking-belt. . .

Till at last, that imagination which is almost poetry flickered out, leaving only ciphers, cold mathematical ciphers in Gerald Cranston's brain.

For a little while longer he conned those ciphers. Then, sweeping the papers that contained them out of reach, he leaned back in his chair and laughed the little self-satisfied laugh of the man who finds his work good. Cranston's, Limited, was big, sound, prosperous. Give him but his own way, and he, its creator, would make it bigger, sounder, more prosperous yet.

So—self-satisfied, self-determined—Harold Cranston found his younger brother, when, a bare half-hour before the board-meeting which had summoned him to London, he came unannounced into the sanctum.

"Train was late," began Harold. "How are you, old man? How's marriage?"

Harold Cranston's younger brother, however, was in no mood for gossip. "Never mind about my marriage. Just run your eye through that," he said, pushing the brass-clipped document across the desk. "I want your opinion on it before these directors of ours arrive."

Reading, a puzzled look came over Harold's face, and the rough, bristly moustache on his upper lip began to quiver; till finally, the puzzlement changed to panic.

"I say——" he began, glancing across the desk with a startled query in his gray-green eyes.

But Cranston, with a terse, "Finish it first, Harry," cut short the query; and after a moment's pause the managing director of Cranston's, Limited, reconcentrated on his panicking

task. When he had finished it, perspiration shone beady above the rims of his glasses.

"Well," he said, handing back the document, "well, I'll be damned."

"You don't approve of my scheme, then?"

"Approve of it!" The elder brother's tone was three notes above his normal. "I should think not."

"Why?"

"Because," Harold's voice came back to the normal, but his hands shook as he spoke; "to begin with, it'll lose us every factor on our books—and every merchant, too."

"Precisely. And what difference will that make?"

"Every difference. We can't do without the middlemen."

"I say that we not only can do without them"—Cranston's jaw set obstinately—"but that we must."

"Even if we can, where's the money to come from? As I understand your idea for the future, it's to increase our colliery output by five hundred tons a day, establish depots all over London, and, instead of marketing our household coal at the pit-head, sell it direct to the consumer. To do that, will mean more capital."

"Never you mind about the capital, Harry. Finding capital's my job, not yours. And for goodness' sake don't worry your head about the increased output. That's a side issue. Once this temporary shortage is over, we'll have our work cut out to market what we're getting up now."

"Well"—Harold, hedging, fingered his moustache—"you may be right. The export boom can't last; this embargo alone will kill it. And, of course, as far as the Midlands go, we always used to market most of our domestic stuff direct. But the provinces ain't London!"

"Exactly." And Gerald plunged into technicalities, ending, "That's why we've got to have the London depots."

"Of course." Harold, half convinced, hedged again; "you've studied the business, and I haven't. All I've got to say is that the thing's too big a gamble. When de-control comes—if it ever does—we'd far better go on as we always have done, selling to the factors."

"Letting them and the merchants take the best of the profit."

"They don't get more than a bob a ton, Gerry."

"Don't they?"

And Gerald Cranston grinned.

Acc No219

CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

SIR JAMES GUTHRIE was a portly, clean-shaven, bald-headed middle-aged gentleman, who wore his new knighthood with as much dignity as his new morning coat, his new top hat and his new white-spatted patent-leather boots. "Can't say I care very much for this fellow Cranston"; thought Sir James, waiting with his head clerk, the abashed and emaciated Lauderdale, in the small, barely-furnished apology for a board-room, which abutted on "this fellow Cranston's" outer offices. "He's altogether too inhuman for my taste. I wonder how that wife of his likes him."

It happened that Maurice Elvery, the first of the directors to arrive, a dapper, short-jacketed, monocled little produce-broker, who spent his days on the Baltic and his evenings in the Royal Automobile Club, was thinking—as a junior ushered him briskly through the doorway—along almost identical lines.

But since the two were only City acquaintances, their thoughts found no expression beyond the one's customary, "Good morning, Sir James," and the other's "Good morning to you, Mr. Elvery"—after which, a trifle constrained, they sat down to the plain oak table, duly set out with printed statements, pens, blotting-paper, foolscap and pewter inkpots, to await the remainder of their colleagues; while Lauderdale, more abashed than ever, hovered behind his employer's chair.

"Good idea—transferring the meetings to London," commented Elvery. "What do you make of the half-year's accounts?"

"Oh," Sir James dry-shaved his dimpled chin, "I can't say I'm dissatisfied. For a comparatively young concern——"

The arrival of two other directors—Robert Grayford, a Nottingham corn-factor, large of blond moustache, red of face, and ample of check waistcoat, whose business had been one of the first absorbed by Cranston's; and McManus, the pimply

little Liverpudlian stock-and-share dealer who had raised most of the outside money for the original flotation—interrupted the accountant's monologue.

Then came Morrison, manager of the machine-works—a stubby-handed, stubble-cheeked podge of a man who believed that all Trade Union leaders ended in Hell. And lastly, gray-whiskered as a badger in his seedy-green early-Victorian frock-coat, old Ephraim Bewsher—originally a Cardiff ship-and-coal master, but now reputed to have more irons in the financial fire than any other magnate in London. Him, as befitted his wealth, Sir James, rising, greeted with an effusive: "Ah, Mr. Bewsher—we were only waiting for you."

"Ain't the Cranstons coming then?" Ephraim, oblivious of Sir James's proffered hand, sat down and drew a slightly frayed specimen from the bandolier of cigars which garnished the left upper pocket of his loose waistcoat.

Sir James, very much on his dignity, resumed his chair; and a moment later, Gerald Cranston, escorted by Parker and his brother, stalked deliberately into the room; nodded a brief acknowledgment of their presence to each of his co-directors; and took the big chair at the head of the table.

"In order not to waste time, gentlemen," he began, "I suggest we take the minutes of our last meeting as read, and proceed to business."

They proceeded to business, after the informal manner of the City—passing the accounts without comment, declaring the half-yearly dividend, congratulating one another on the market-price of their shares. "Puppets," thought Cranston, watching them. "Puppets."

The thought of their puppet-hood stimulated the power-lust in him. He saw those other directors of his—all except Ephraim Bewsher, who, saying never a word, puffed and puffed at his fraying cigar-butt—as creatures of his own will, forced either from apathy or self-interest to do as he should bid them. "Elvery," he decided, "only took up his directorship so as to get our linseed orders. Harry's half pledged. Morrison only cares for the factory. McManus won't risk losing my private account. As long as Sir James gets an increased fee for the increased work he'll be all for it. Grayford won't interfere with anything outside the corn trade. And Parker still owes me half the money for his qualification shares . . ."

All the same, the fact that Ephraim Bewsher might oppose the new scheme had to be considered. The old man, quite apart from his holding in the Company, was a power. He could

not only find money of his own, but influence other people's. Accordingly, at the conclusion of routine, it was on the buff gray-whiskered countenance of the ex-shipmaster that Gerald Cranston registered the first gun of his argument.

"Mr. Bewsher," he opened, "as the only other practical coal-man in this room, I want to ask you a question."

"Ask away, Cranston." The old badger felt for a second cigar and kindled it on the butt of the first. "But don't be long about it. I want my dinner."

"The question's this, Mr. Bewsher: What is going to happen to the coal trade—and more particularly to our household coal-seams—when the Government stops interfering and we get back to normal?"

"Happen?" Ephraim grinned. "Don't ask me what's going to happen. Likely as not I'll be dead by then."

The Chairman, who, despite his directness, possessed a certain business tact, countered this with a semi-affable, "I'm sure we all hope that control isn't going to last quite so long as that, Mr. Bewsher"; and, having failed to draw the badger, opened fire on the rest of the Board.

"Damme," thought Harold, listening for the second time to his arguments, "the man's a marvel——"

For the plans, simply though Gerald expounded them, bristled with a bewilderment of facts and figures: so that, long before he was through, even Sir James Guthrie acknowledged himself—for once in a way—defeated. "I hope you're taking those calculations down," whispered Sir James to the obsequious Lauderdale.

Ephraim Bewsher, however, as Gerald could see, was neither defeated nor convinced. "Cut the cackle, Cranston," he grunted half-way through the piece. "It's easy enough to talk about marketing domestic coal direct to the London consumer, but how are you going to set about it?"

"In exactly the same way as other coal merchants, Mr. Bewsher"—the Chairman's voice continued suave—"in the same way, to be precise, as we are already conducting, or trying to conduct, our business in the Midlands. My proposal is that we have our own London depots, our own order-offices and our own lorries."

"And how much do you think that's going to cost?"

"For the first year"—Cranston never batted an eyelid—"fifty thousand."

"And for the next?"

"Say a hundred thousand."

"It'll take all that," interrupted Ephraim, "and maybe a hundred thousand more."

"Then," Grayford spoke; "I don't think we ought to do it."

"Nor I," chorused Elvery.

"I dispute that last statement, Mr. Bewsher." A little of its suavity deserted Cranston's voice, and his blue eyes flickered battle up and down the table.

"Do I understand you to suggest, Mr. Cranston"—Sir James Guthrie, scenting trouble, did his best to start a fresh hare—"that we should issue fresh capital to finance this distributing scheme?"

"Not for the moment, Sir James." The Chairman's eyes still flickered over the faces of his puppets. "For the moment, a bank loan ought to see us through."

"As a public company," Ephraim returned to the attack; "you'll get no bank loan without a debenture. And if you issue a debenture, you'll knock twenty-five per cent. off the market-price of your ordinary shares."

"That, too," said Cranston curtly, "I dispute."

"I should hardly think, Mr. Bewsher"—once more Sir James Guthrie intervened—"that for a mere fifty thousand, the bank would insist on a debenture. The directors' guarantee, perhaps——"

"Guarantees be sugared," growled Ephraim, the cigar-ash speckling his waistcoat. "And what about the interest? That'll tot up to four thousand a year."

Whereupon, rather to his brother's surprise, Harold Cranston broke silence with a loyal: "Gentlemen, aren't we rather rushing our fences? Surely the first thing to do is to decide whether we agree to these proposals. If we do agree, the money-question can be discussed later. Personally, though I'm no expert, I must say that my brother's idea seems to have its points. In the Midlands, now——"

Harold talked on: till eventually Maurice Elvery, his thoughts on his linseed business, changed ground. "I must say," remarked that dapper little individual, "that, having heard our managing director's views, I am more inclined to agree with our Chairman."

"And you, Grayford?" Cranston seized the opportunity. "Leaving finance on one side, what's your opinion?"

"My opinion"—Grayford inserted both thumbs in the armholes of his check waistcoat—"apart from finance, of course, is the same as Elvery's. But I'm no coal-man. It's for you

and your brother and Mr. Bewsher to advise us on the technical points."

"And yours, Morrison?"

"Well," the works-manager passed a stubby hand over his chin-stubble, "if you ask me, it's a question of labour."

Discussion on these lines lasted more or less amicably for five minutes; at the end of which it became apparent to Ephraim Bewsher that, if matters were put to the vote, he would be beaten. "Obstinate fellow, this Cranston," mused that astute individual. "One of your make-or-break sort. He'll break, I think. Still, he's got 'em all in his pocket. Now, talking of pockets, I wonder——"

Ephraim Bewsher continued to wonder while Cranston, his puppets once more in hand, elaborated his plans to the terse conclusion: "If, as I take it, you all approve, the sooner you empower me to start operations the better." Then, surprisingly, he butted in with a chuckling, "Gentlemen, I'm an old man, and a very small shareholder. It's not for me to gainsay our Chairman. Maybe he's right, and I'm wrong. Anyway, I'll not oppose the scheme. Let's cut the cackle again, gentlemen. Mr. Cranston, here, tells us he wants a free hand. That, I take it, means that he'll not ask the rest of us, especially an old man like myself," the chuckle rose, "to guarantee his fifty thousand pound overdraft."

"Artful devil," thought Gerald Cranston, "so that's what he was driving at all the time." Nevertheless, for fear of arousing further opposition, he had to concede the point; and—the badger, pleading it was "high time for his dinner," having withdrawn—Parker, acting on Sir James Guthrie's pompous instructions, made a note that: "The directors further empowered the Chairman to take whatever steps he might think necessary for the expansion of the company's coal business."

On which note, the Board-meeting proceeded—Elvery with Sir James, Lauderdale with Parker, and the remainder of it with the Chairman—to lunch.

§ 2

Long lunches were never Gerald Cranston's habit. At two-fifteen, leaving Grayford, Morrison, and his brother Harry still discussing—over fat cigars in the underground Palmerston—the impending prosecution for fraud of Edward Robert Sedgcumbe and the other directors of Coronation Cotton, he walked slowly along the tiled passage towards Old Broad Street. As he walked,

his brain functioned at high pressure—mapping out further details of his scheme. "Have to put a really good man in charge," he thought; and so thinking, encountered Tillotson.

"I was coming to find you, sir," began Tillotson. "Something's happening on the Exchange. They've marked our ordinaries up five shillings since one o'clock. And there's a letter just come for you from Mr. Bewsher. It's marked 'Urgent and Confidential'."

"Thanks, Tillotson." Cranston took the typewritten envelope; and, thrusting it unopened into the pocket of his jacket, returned hot-foot to Pinner's Court. The rise in the shares—Cranston Ordinaries were a very limited market on the London Stock Exchange—needed elucidation. "Bewsher's letter can wait," he decided, returning to his sanctum and laying the envelope on his desk while he got through to his brokers.

The weather had cleared a little. Over the chimney-pots, through the three narrow windows, stole gleams of watery sunshine. Automatically, waiting for his call, Cranston switched off the desk-lamp. Then—his brokers pleading completest ignorance of the share transaction which had caused the rise—he switched the lamp on again; and, with his usual deliberateness, slit Bewsher's envelope to read:—

"Dear Mr. Cranston,—On thinking over the policy discussed at to-day's Board-meeting, I am convinced that it is the wrong one. Will you therefore—if no embarrassment—let me resign my directorship? I find that I possess, in addition to my five-hundred-pound (nominal) Preferred share qualification, a little parcel of Ordinaries. Should you care to relieve me of same, you would be doing a favour to, Yours sincerely, EPHRAIM BEWSHER. P.S.—To-day's market-price would be quite satisfactory."

Cranston, his forehead wrinkling, read the note twice; wondered, for a second or so, whether it would be worth while offending the old man; decided it inadvisable; and called through his desk-transmitter to bring the shareholders' register. According to that register, Ephraim Bewsher held three thousand two-pound Ordinary shares—the value of which, since one o'clock, had appreciated by seven hundred and fifty pounds!

"There's a catch somewhere," thought Cranston; but before he could solve the problem, the telephone-bell tinkled and a girl's voice asked: "Am I speaking to Mr. Gerald Cranston? . . . Will you hold on a moment, please, sir? . . . Mr. Bewsher wishes to speak with you."

"Hallo!" A moment later, Ephraim's own voice came, cracked but confident, over the wire. "Hallo! Is that you, Mr. Cranston? Did you get my letter?"

"I'm just reading it now," remarked Cranston, playing for time; and his brain hammered away at its problem while the cracked voice went on: "You understand that I don't want to embarrass you by resigning in a hurry—especially with the market so firm. But I'm an old man—a very old man. And my solicitors don't like my holding too many speculative shares. They say," a chuckle, "that if anything were to happen, ordinary shares would take a lot of realizing. Especially," another chuckle, "ordinary shares in Cranston's, Limited. If anything were to happen to me—they say—and my executors had to realize my holding, the loss on your shares might be as much as ten shillings a piece. That's why I thought that, before doing anything in the matter, I'd offer them to you."

"At market-price?" Suddenly—for now part of the catch was plain as daylight—Gerald Cranston's eyes flickered for battle.

"Of course"—the old man came back at him—"*London* market-price. Two and a half, five-eighths, I think they are, or thereabouts."

"For how many?"

"Let me see," slowly. "How many have I got? Three thousand five hundred, I think it is. Yes, that's right, three thousand *five hundred*."

At that, though his eyes still flickered for battle, Gerald Cranston knew himself already defeated. Thinking sixty thoughts to the second, he realized that Ephraim, by purchasing those extra five hundred shares in his "dinner-hour", had purposely raised the price—that Ephraim's talk about his solicitors was mere camouflage—that Ephraim, actually, was threatening to throw his entire ordinary holding on a limited market, and simultaneously to resign his directorship, unless he, the majority shareholder, bought him out at a profit.

For the fraction of a moment, his gall rose; for the fraction of a moment he knew the impulse to let the Welshman carry out his unuttered threat, to counter it by buying against him on the Exchange. That move, however, would save no money. And besides, the old man's sudden resignation might prejudice the company with its bankers.

"Daylight robbery," he thought: but in the end, nervous of offending a money-power greater than his own, decided to submit—doing so with a controlled, "Very well, Mr. Bewsher, I'll take the little parcel at two-and-a-half. You can have my

cheque on delivery of the script. It's understood, of course, that you won't resign from the Board or dispose of your director's qualification until I can find somebody of equal standing to take your place."

"You'll have the script to-morrow." Ephraim Bewsher chuckled over the wire. "All except the odd five hundred. Maybe they'll take a day or so longer."

"And what about the directorship?"

"There's no hurry about that, Mr. Cranston. Suit your own convenience. Maybe," a last chuckle, "if I hang on to the qualification shares a while—I'll pay for another dinner out of them."

The victimiser clicked off, and his victim summoned Tillotson. "Wonder what's behind that?" thought Tillotson, watching the calm, unmoved face which dictated confirmation of the recent share-deal.

Despite the outward calmness, however, Gerald Cranston could not quite conquer his gall. Ephraim's last chuckle had rankled—and continued to rankle. He felt that he had been beaten—beaten ruthlessly out of nearly a thousand pounds. That the beating had been strictly in accordance with the rules of the game, he realized—yet, consciously a little, and subconsciously a great deal, it irritated him.

He, Gerald Cranston, had knuckled under to a power greater than his own!

§ 3

At six o'clock that afternoon the Chairman of Cranston's, Limited, took his hat and coat from the hook behind the door; wished his staff a curt, "Good evening"; descended; told Havers, "Phillimore Gardens!" and, leaning back against the upholstery as the car gathered way, kindled himself one of his rare cigarettes. "Got to be careful of my temper," he thought, watching the lamp-lights of the Embankment streak by. "One can't be a winner all the time."

Then, once more self-controlled, he began to consider his mother. His mother—bless her!—didn't take enough care of herself. She oughtn't to be in Town all the winter; she ought to be in Egypt, or on the Riviera . . .

Mrs. Cranston, however, thought otherwise. When her younger son, seated opposite to her in his own especial chintz-covered armchair, broached the subject across the tea-table, she merely laughed at him.

"Home's home," laughed the little old-fashioned woman in the little old-fashioned dress, with a glance, half-pleased and half ironical, at the miscellany of knick-knacks which littered the provincial-looking room she insisted on referring to as "the parlour." And, "Don't you try to mollycoddle me, my son," she went on—the tired blue eyes twinkling in her lined, homely face, as her well-kept hands floated between jam and tea-pot. "*I'm* not one of your la-di-da Society women. *I* don't need a change of air every month or so."

Cranston, knowing her obstinacy (which more than matched his own), abandoned the topic.

"Harold been here?" he asked casually.

"He's just gone."

"Didn't say anything about business, I suppose?"

"Not a word"—the tired eyes still twinkled—"except to say that you were overworking yourself as usual. Talk about me going to the Riviera, Gerry! What about you?"

"I don't need holidays—besides, I've only just got back from Studley."

"You've been back six weeks—and working till eleven most nights."

"Who told you that yarn, mother?"

"Your wife."

"When was she here?" asked Cranston, a trifle annoyed that Hermione—about whom he had hardly thought since nine o'clock that morning—should have "put silly ideas into the old lady's head."

"She lunched with me to-day," went on "the old lady". "A very sensible woman she is, too. Nothing of the la-di-da about her."

"I'm glad you and she get on, mother." Cranston laughed. "It isn't usual, I believe."

"Bunkum," countered Mrs. Cranston. "Why shouldn't a mother-in-law get on with her daughter-in-law? Take it from me, son, that wife of yours is no fool. She'll run that new house you've taken almost as well"—with a little chuckle which somehow reminded Cranston of Ephraim—"as I should."

"You don't think she'll be too extravagant with the butter?"

"She'll never be half as extravagant as you are, Gerry. Rolls-Royces, indeed! You'll be filing your petition one of these fine days."

Mother and son continued to talk in the hard, bantering manner which both affected to conceal their feelings, for another half-hour—at the end of which time Havers, summoned

grumbling by a trim parlour-maid from his comfortable tea in the basement, was instructed to drive to the Ritz. "And tell Lees I shall want him at half-past-seven, sharp," ordered Cranston, the drive finished.

"Very good, sir," Havers saluted. "I fancy her ladyship has already given similar instructions. Usual time in the morning for you, sir?"

"No. Half-an-hour earlier—till further notice. Good-night to you, Havers."

"Good-night, sir."

The flaxen-haired Yorkshireman, still grousing under his breath, drove off up Arlington Street to the new garage; and Cranston, pushing his tall way through the revolving door of the hotel, stopped for a moment at the mahogany desk to inquire if there were any letters.

"None this evening, Mr. Cranston," smiled the blue-uniformed hall-porter, adding: "Her ladyship has not yet gone upstairs. She told me to tell you."

"Thanks. I see where she is."

Cranston, handing his hat and coat to a page, strode off towards the rotunda, where Hermione, dignified in black hat and dark day-clothes, was entertaining an impromptu party, consisting of her cousin Angela, her younger brother, Alan, and—quite fortuitously, he having called to leave cards and found her taking tea—Gordon Ibbotsleigh.

Hermione acknowledged his arrival with her usual calm; Gordon Ibbotsleigh said, a trifle stiffly, "Good evening, Cranston. How are you?"; the Honourable Alan Rawley—a tall, well-groomed cavalry subaltern, whose resemblance to his sister stopped short at the colouring of his hair, which was almost albino—excused himself with a drawled, "Well, I've got to be off. Meet you at the family dinner-table this evening"; but Angela Hemmingway, extending a limp little, provocative hand, sparkled instant to effusion.

"Gerald—I hope you don't mind my calling him Gerald now he's one of the family, Hermione?" sparkled Angela; "you're disgustingly late. And why on earth do you live at the Ritz? The Ritz is quite unfashionable for millionaires now-a-days. If I were your wife," a provocative smile allied itself to the provocative hand, "I should insist on moving to Claridges."

"Oh, the Ritz isn't as bad as all that," retorted Cranston, freeing his fingers and drawing himself up a chair. "Besides, we shan't be here long."

"You'll be here another six weeks." Angela leaned back, a

tiny mannequin of a figure against the chinchilla cloak which draped her gold chair. "And the rest—if I know anything about builders. Tell me—how *is* the housing problem? Aldford Street's going to be simply wonderful, I suppose. Enough to make one break the tenth commandment—it is the tenth, isn't it? And while you're telling me—if you have a spark of family affection in you—order me another cocktail. Martini with a dash, please. Gordon will have one too, if you ask him—won't you, Gordon?"

The ordered cocktails came; and Ibbotsleigh, sipping his in silence while Angela prattled on, watched her appraisingly.

There was no mystery, to him, about Angela. Everybody in the various sets she frequented—and she frequented several—knew of her two arranged restitution suits, of the chivalry which had prevented either of her husbands from defending them.

No! there was no mystery—none of that mystery, for instance, which exhaled like a perfume from the whole dignified personality of Hermione—about the woman who had just divorced Lionel Hemmingway. She represented, continued Ibbotsleigh's thought, a type: "Society"—as imagined by the moving-picture patron. Yet, type or no type, one had to admit, scrutinizing the displayed charms of that straw-blond head, of that pale-cheeked, blue-eyed, scarlet-lipped countenance, Angela's attractions. And, "Damn it," decided the mining-engineer abruptly; "damn it, if men like Cranston must marry women of our class, why the devil don't they marry the Angelas?"

Once again, as on that last occasion at Studley Farm, he wanted to get away from Cranston. Angela, however, whom he had promised to see home, prattled on; till gradually, his eyes deserting her too animated face for the calm dignity of Hermione's, he grew conscious of the old hatred against Hermione's husband. So far, he had kept that hatred in check; but this evening—as though some fire, long damped down, had blazed up sudden in the dark places of his soul—he knew the full scorch of it. Knew, too, with a sudden strange irresistible knowledge, that he loved, and had always loved, Hermione.

Yes! even in the old days, the days when she was Tony's, long and long before she sold herself—through his chance instrumentality—to this opulent outsider, to this Gerald Cranston, whose very proprietorial air was an insult, he, Gordon Ibbotsleigh, had cared for his friend's wife; cared for her not as men cared for the Angelas of the world, but whole-heartedly, with

that passion which smoulders and smoulders till, finally, it devours both the lover's body and his soul.

And " God," he thought, going, " God ! I want her—I want her to madness."

For there was but little self-discipline and no fear of woman in Gordon Ibbotsleigh !

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ 1

NATURALLY enough, neither Cranston nor his wife, as they dressed separately and hurriedly for dinner, vouchsafed a single thought to Gordon Ibbotsleigh. Busied, the one with the difficulty of replacing Ephraim Bewsher on the Cranston directorate, and the other with more intimate problems, they completely forgot the very existence of that rather melodramatic personage.

All afternoon—ever since, somewhat to her own surprise, she had kissed his mother goodbye at Phillimore Gardens—Hermione's mind, carrying on the thought-train of early morning, had been running on her husband's dissimilarity from the men of her own set. "He's a puzzle," she mused; "a complicated, rather intriguing puzzle"; and when—early arrived at her father's barrack of a mansion in Great Cumberland Place—they climbed the cold ill-lighted stairs to the vast gloomy night-nursery which she had once shared with Alan, the complications of the puzzle intrigued her yet further.

Arthur—one wax-like hand clenched at his cheek, and his hair, yellow as Tony's, tousled over his pale forehead—slept quiet-breathing and motionless under the satin eiderdown. A night-light burned, opal-shaded, on the mantelpiece; and by its pale pink radiance she could see how the stern set lines of Gerald's face softened to tenderness as they bent together over the cot.

"Thank the Lord, we didn't wake the little beggar," he whispered as they tip-toed from the room. "It'll be a good thing when we get him under our own roof in Aldford Street. By the way, how's the new nurse? Trustworthy?"

"She seems all right."

They interviewed the new nurse, a pleasant-featured middle-aged woman, with a figure like a motherly bear's, who rose from her sewing at their entrance into the day-nursery; and, once again, noticing how Gerald's face hardened as he questioned

her about the child's welfare, Hermione felt herself puzzled. Gerald's questions were so abrupt, so businesslike, so definitely unsentimental, so concerned with the child's health and so unconcerned with his happiness, that she wondered fleetingly whether imagination had deceived her about his momentary tenderness.

Nevertheless, leaving nurse and day-nursery, she experienced anew that gratitude she had felt on the terrace at "Cosgrave." This new husband of hers, she realized, might have a thousand faults; but one fault—dereliction of duty—was not in him.

They went on, in silence, down the vast picture-hung staircase towards the vaster drawing room. To Hermione, this place was "home"—every nook and corner of it, a memory. But to her husband, Rorkton House appeared scarcely more habitable than the derelict mansion of little Arthur's inheritance.

Compared with that which he was making of Fifteen A. Aldford Street, this house seemed an anachronism, a relic of some dead age. The pictures on its landings might be valuable, but mere value could not compensate for their hideousness. A bathroom door, open, revealed primitive plumbing. The stair-carpets were worn thin, the lamp-globes dusty.

"If it were mine," he thought, as he followed his wife into the still empty drawing room which occupied most of the first floor, "I'd turn the place into flats."

Husband and wife waited a conversationless moment or so by the inadequate coal-fire under the elaborate marble chimney-piece; till the owner of the room appeared, and Gerald Cranston, his imagination momentarily at work, realized that for such a man as the Earl of Rorkton, such a house provided one of the few possible settings.

For though the Earl, apart from his house, looked, as his house apart from the Earl, like an anachronism—seen in conjunction, both had an air. The Earl's clothes, for instance—and especially the black stock-like Joinville tie which he affected above his soft frilled shirt-front—were as out of date as his gold-fringed curtains; yet his height carried them off, in the same way as the height of his drawing room managed to carry off its window-draperies: and as the old aristocrat came slowly across the gigantic, and somewhat dusty, carpet, the young plutocrat knew himself, definitely, impressed.

"A fine type," thought the young plutocrat, perpending the high forehead, the steel-gray eyes, the silvering hair, and the clean-cut clean-shaven lips of his father-in-law. Then, as the Earl kissed his daughter, and, proffering a fine ringless hand,

began, "How are you, Gerald? How's the new abode progressing?" another more selfish thought crossed his mind.

The three stood chatting aimlessly for another five minutes; and while they chatted, Gerald Cranston's brain continued active. "Why not try and persuade the Earl to take Bewsher's place?" asked that brain.

The scheme was an appealing one; and abruptly, he decided to adopt it. At worst, his father-in-law could only refuse; and that, in view of his comparative poverty, seemed unlikely. The Earl, moreover, would—at that particular moment—find the director's fees especially acceptable.

"Alan talks of chucking the Service," he was saying. "I shan't like that much. But I suppose it can't be helped. Five hundred a year doesn't go very far in the Household Cavalry."

"But, what's he going to do if he does resign his commission, father?" put in Hermione.

"I'm sure I don't know." The Earl laughed. "He's got some scheme or other—orange-growing, I think."

"Orange-growing takes a considerable capital," interpolated Gerald; just as his younger brother-in-law—obviously a throw-back to the dead Countess, whose portrait hung, red-lipped, pale-haired and willowy, in the tarnished gilt frame above the elaborate chimney-piece—arrived in the company of the Earl's elder son, Viscount Doxford, who, despite the modernness of his smoking-jacket and his thirty years juniority to him, appeared—with his graying hair and his already desiccated skin—the very image of his aristocratic progenitor.

Conversation came to a full stop while the two brothers—the elder in the modulated voice of the Foreign Office official, and the younger drawling as he curled his blond moustache between first and forefinger—greeted their father; and had not been renewed by the time that two of Hermione's aunts, tall, plainly-dressed, plain-spoken, horsy-looking women, and the gawky third cousin they were mutually chaperoning, completed the family party: which thereupon, a gong sounding cavernous from the hall, proceeded informally to dinner.

§ 2

The meal, served under the presidency of an antiquated butler by two not particularly efficient maids, was of the simplest. Eating it, Cranston continued to meditate. The Rorkton poverty—it seemed to him—was an unnecessary poverty. Take Alan, for instance. What right had Alan to sponge on his

father? "Good Lord," he thought, listening to the boy's drawl, "if only I'd had that youngster's advantages!"

All the same, Hermione's family had their points. Rich or poor, old aristocrats or new democrats (he realized, listening to their conversation, how much more democratic they were than himself) these people possessed poise, balance, self-certainty, a traditional discipline. Therein—and in a communal tenacity of purpose, which found its expression for the most part through a dry, whimsical humour—lay the secret of the power they still wielded: a power political rather than economical, tending—or so it appeared from the Earl's conversation—neither to the extreme Right nor to the extreme Left, but definitely towards a compromise between the two.

"This country will never do any good," said Hermione's father, sipping at his unsweetened barley-water, "until we get back to party politics. The present system gives too much power to the few, too little to the many."

"I rather agree." Doxford, having echoed his father, turned to the silent Cranston. "Don't you, Gerald?"

"Frankly," Cranston spoke with his usual directness, "I'm not particularly interested in politics. It always seems to me that industry is infinitely more important than legislation. And in industry, power must belong to the few."

"To men like yourself, eh?" laughed Doxford.

"Precisely. After all, industry depends on discipline."

"Industry, though," one of the aunts chipped in, "will have to be humanized."

"We must organize our industrial armies before we can humanize them," retorted Cranston.

"Militant capitalism!" Doxford returned to the attack. "But your industrial armies won't tolerate conscription. You can't run a peace like you run a war."

"Why not? In principle, peace and war are the same. You can't discipline soldiers if you abolish the death penalty for cowardice; and you can't discipline civilians if you abolish the penalty of starvation for idleness and inefficiency."

"I admit," objected the Earl, "that if you once pay the average man to idle, he will idle. All the same, you can't—in a Christian community—let your inefficients, or even your idlers, starve to death. Besides," with a slow smile at his younger son, "what would happen to the Household Cavalry if our friend Gerald refused them their rations on the ground that they never did any work?"

Battle along these lines continued, amiably enough, till

Hermione—once more acutely conscious of her husband's dissimilarity from the men of her own kind—signalled aunts and cousin to withdraw; and—the Honourable Alan excusing himself after one hasty glass of port—Cranston found himself alone with Doxford and his father-in-law. Then, as the hall door closed softly behind his younger son, and the departing chug of a taxi carried in through the worn velvet curtains of the dining room to the candle-lit mahogany table, the Earl changed the conversation.

"It's a pity about Alan," he said. "If he resigns his commission, it'll be the waste of a promising career. His Colonel tells me he's a born cavalry-officer—but what's the good of being a born cavalry-officer when you can't afford to live like one? Don't you agree, Gerald?"

Cranston, premeditating how best to introduce the subject of the directorship, merely nodded. Doxford, however, tilting the decanter for the second time, put in: "Aren't you taking the matter a little too seriously, father? Soldiering is more of a blind alley than a career now-a-days."

"Not so blind an alley as a mythical orange-grove," retorted the Earl. "At least, not for Alan. We've to remember, you see"—he looked at his new son-in-law as though to say, "You're one of us now, and we keep no secrets from you"—"that the boy is one of the weaker vessels. He needs discipline—that particular kind of discipline which boys only get in a good regiment. That's why—quite apart from the difficulty of finding capital to set him up in a plantation—I'd make almost any sacrifice to keep him with the Cavalry."

"It doesn't seem to me, father," Doxford's voice, to the carefully-listening Cranston, sounded somewhat brusque, "that any further financial sacrifices should be necessary. If Alan were only reasonably careful, five hundred a year and the present rates of pay should more than suffice his needs."

"They should," agreed the Earl. "But unfortunately they don't. Recollect—*you've* your mother's money, Cyril . . ."

Followed a silence—broken by Cranston's sudden intervention, "I hope you won't think it presumptuous of me, sir; but, how much more *does* Alan require?"

"I should say," the Earl's fine ringless fingers toyed uncomfortably with his cigar, while the Viscount's steel-gray pupils glanced well-bred surprise across the table-cloth, "that another fifty pounds a quarter ought to see him through. With luck, he'll get his Captaincy next year."

Followed another, longer silence: during which it became

fairly obvious to the new member of the family that he would need considerable tact to avoid giving offence.

"It's a most curious coincidence, sir," he began gingerly, "and I do hope that both you and Cyril will understand it is purely a coincidence, that I should have been wondering, during the greater part of the evening, whether by any chance I could persuade you to accept the identical sum you have just mentioned."

"Persuade me?"

"Persuade father?"

The Earl's and his son's eyebrows lifted simultaneously; but Cranston, unperturbed, went on in frank, businesslike phrases to propound his scheme. "You understand, of course, sir," he ended, "that should you accept this directorship, you will not only be benefiting Alan, but conferring a great favour on me."

"Quite so." Hermione's father, who had listened without comment, took a slow puff at his cigar. "Quite so, Gerald."

The Earl's decision, however, tarried—till eventually, having asked several shrewdly pertinent questions, to which and their answers his elder son listened like a judge on the bench, he proposed adjournment to his library. "I wonder if you'd mind making our excuses to the ladies, Cyril," he suggested as the three of them rose from the dinner-table.

The library, which led out of the dining room, was a chill, rather poverty-stricken apartment; and Cranston, eyeing its soiled carpet as he settled his long body, at its owner's bidding, in an ill-sprung leather armchair set sideways to the ill-polished mahogany desk, found the old man's hesitation difficult to understand. "What's he brought me in here for?" thought Cranston, lifting his eyes from the carpet to inspect the fine features which shewed careworn in the light of a green-shaded reading-lamp. "If I were in his position—Alan or no Alan—I shouldn't have thought twice about accepting an extra two hundred a year."

Cranston's father-in-law, however, was not Cranston. "If you don't mind," he began, to the other's surprise, "we'll leave the question of the directorship in abeyance, till we've discussed another little matter. The matter of Hermione's boy! Hermione and Cyril"—the veined hands played with a paper-knife—"have always been rather at loggerheads on the subject of her first marriage. That's why I took the opportunity of getting rid of him. Cyril, you see, regards the baby as a Cosgrave liability. That would be all very well, if the Cosgraves were

willing to see things in the same light. Unfortunately, they aren't. The responsibility, therefore, is yours and mine. You remember, perhaps, our previous conversation on that point ?"

"Perfectly, sir." It had taken Cranston—his mind still concentrated on his business—a full quarter-minute to follow his father-in-law's new drift ; and as the old man—his innate tact skating gracefully over the thinnest of thin ice—went on : "You will remember, too, that when your marriage to my daughter was originally on the *tapis*, I suggested that your simplest way of shouldering the responsibility in question would be by a legal settlement ?" it took him yet another quarter-minute to realize the full extent of the Earl's diplomacy.

"I believe you did make some such suggestion, sir," he answered, after a pause.

"You, however, if my memory serves me," continued the old-fashioned diplomacy, "vetoed that suggestion on the ground that it would tie up too much of your capital. Naturally "—the paper-knife tapped diffidence on the desk top—"if the grounds of that veto still hold good, I have nothing further to say. If, on the other hand—as I rather gathered from the talk we have just had—your affairs are prospering, it certainly does seem to me—human life and human marriage being what they are—that Cosgrave's boy, and if possible my daughter, should be safeguarded by some such method as the one I originally proposed."

The paper-knife ceased its tapping, the Earl his speech ; and for the second time that day, Gerald Cranston felt himself confronted by a power greater than his own. The adequacy of that power, the smooth method of its wielding, irritated him. "The old man's trying to drive a bargain," he thought. "If I'll make a settlement, he'll join the Board." Nevertheless, the selflessness of the bargain—the sheer altruism of his father-in-law's demands—was impressive.

"Hermione and the boy are both provided for in my will, sir," he hedged.

"I realize that, my dear Gerald ; and I realize "—the modulated voice was friendly—"that the provisions of your will are extremely liberal. All the same, my original view—more especially having regard to our conversation after dinner—has not altered."

"Do I understand, then "—Cranston, undecided, continued to hedge—"that you insist . . ."

"Pardon me "—the Earl's voice grew a shade less friendly —"there is no question of insistence. Even had I the right, I should not insist. Under any circumstances, I should only

suggest, though perhaps a little more strongly if I were an associate in your commercial enterprises, instead of merely your father-in-law, that a man's obligations towards his wife—and in your particular case towards his wife's child—are at least as important as his obligations towards his business. As a business man, moreover—forgive me the further suggestion—you should be the first to recognise that a will is a revocable document, whereas a legal settlement . . ."

The purposeful sentence did not finish; and for an appreciable time the two men's eyes clashed, young blue against old gray, across the projected radiance of the reading-lamp.

At last, more in courtesy than as a sign of decision reached, the younger man asked: "And if I were to agree to make a settlement, sir, how much, in your opinion, would be reasonable?

"The amount"—the elder man's eyebrows lifted—"would be for you to decide. On the one hand, it must not be so heavy as to handicap your business operations; yet, on the other, it should be sufficient—according to my idea—for the boy's maintenance, and, in case of need, Hermione's."

"Naturally, sir." Cranston's tone continued courteous and the Earl's eyebrows resumed their normal position. "I take it, too, that in the event of Arthur Cosgrave dying before his mother, the suggested settlement would revert to her."

"Presumably." The Earl, his point driven home, relaxed. "But that, also, would be for you to decide. I don't pretend to be a lawyer. So long as you admit the principle of a settlement, I should be quite content to leave the details to some trustworthy firm of solicitors—say, Poole, Cartwright & Poole."

"I'm afraid," Cranston smiled rather grimly, "that Poole, Cartwright & Poole don't approve of my methods. We had some correspondence recently—about their neglect of Hermione's, or rather Arthur's property."

"Then by all means, Gerald," the Earl rose as he spoke, "have your own solicitors. And please don't think, or let them think, that I'm trying to rush you into this decision. There's no hurry whatsoever. Consider the matter at your leisure, and, when you have considered it, do as your conscience dictates. Meanwhile"—he moved towards a safe in the far corner of the room and began fumbling in his pockets for the key of it—"since I've presumed to give you my advice on one subject, here's another on which I'd be very grateful for yours. These documents"—the safe had opened without difficulty, and its owner having extracted certain papers and re-locked it, was now returning to his desk—"are all I have to shew from my last—I

may say my only—adventure in the City. Marankari Concessions—you will see, if you refer to the top document, that Marankari lies south of Gantam in the Northern Provinces of Nigeria—failed rather through lack of capital than through lack of inherent value. Given capital, I am convinced that the tin, to say nothing of the other minerals on the property, could be mined at a considerable profit. Anyway, the lease—my lease—for, quixotically perhaps, when the original syndicate ran out of money, I decided it my duty to recoup the poorer shareholders out of my own pocket—still holds good . . ."

"I'm afraid, sir," interrupted Cranston, still scrutinizing the documents, "that my advice won't be of much value. I know nothing about tin—and still less about Nigeria. I can make some inquiries, if you wish me to—— "

"Do so, by all means." The Earl rising for the second time, signified the unsatisfactory interview almost at an end. "And when you have an hour to spare, go through the papers yourself. You'll find them, I can promise you, rather an interesting study. According to Ibbotsleigh's report on the main lode, Marankari Concessions ought to be worth a fortune."

"Ibbotsleigh!" Cranston, too, rose. "Is that the Ibbotsleigh, I know—Gordon Ibbotsleigh?"

"Yes." The Earl turned back to his desk. "I had a letter from him on the subject a day or two ago. He asked me—as far as I can recollect—if it wouldn't be possible to resuscitate the original little company, and send him out to continue boring operations. He estimates—I'll put my hand on his letter in a minute or two—that another five thousand pounds carefully expended might easily expose sufficient alluvial tin (cassiterite, he calls it) to pay for opening up the main lode. Personally, I rather doubt if five thousand would be enough. Still, I've the greatest faith in Gordon Ibbotsleigh. . ."

The old man continued to testify his faith in the engineer and to search the dusty pigeon-holes for his letter, till a discreet knock and the antiquated butler's face peering through the library doorway to announce, "Her ladyship asked me to tell your lordship that Mrs. Alastair Rawley and Miss Cynthia Rawley are about to take their departure," interrupted the processes. Then, with a resigned, "I'm afraid that means we'll have to join the ladies," he abandoned his search and led the way upstairs.

§ 3

Hermione, watching her husband and father return to the drawing room, scarcely noticed the signs of unusual pre-occupation on Gerald's face. The little puckers at the corners of the eye-sockets—always a signal of annoyance with him—vanished almost before she had observed them. His goodbye to her aunts and cousin, his part in the four-cornered desultory conversation which followed, gave her no clue to the thoughts which were harassing his brain. Nevertheless, she realized—subconsciously if not consciously—that his interview with the Earl had not been altogether a smooth one.

Gradually, moreover—continuing her covert watching of him—it came to her that the interview in question must somehow have concerned her own welfare. Every now and again, Gerald's eyes seemed to be appraising her—as though, behind them, the brain were holding some debate, of which she was the subject. The debate, she could feel, was not hostile. All the same, it made her vaguely uncomfortable ; so that when, shortly after ten-thirty, the desultory conversation came to an end, and Gerald, even more inscrutable than usual, handed her into the waiting Rolls, her very first remark was the tentative question :

" What were you and father so long about downstairs, Gerald ? "

" We were talking—business."

" Alan's business ? "

" Partly."

Her husband's voice, forbidding further questions, served only to heighten Hermione's curiosity. Sitting silent by his silent side as the car swung past the Marble Arch down a semi-deserted Park Lane, she determined to solve the puzzle of this new aloofness. " I'm his wife," she thought. " If father and he discussed my affairs, I've a right to know what they said."

They came to the Ritz ; and, once again, as Gerald ushered her into the fire-lit sitting-room, she could not help comparing him with her first husband. Tony, before lighting a cigarette and pouring himself a whisky-and-soda, would have kissed her—violently, passionately. Gerald merely helped her to divest herself of her fur-trimmed opera-cloak.

She asked him, blushing in secret at the old recollection : " And what about me ? Don't I deserve a little soda-water after entertaining Mildred and Cynthia ? "

He apologized, genuinely upset at the oversight ; and, taking

the filled glass from his outstretched hand, she sat herself down by the fire. "Tired?" she queried.

"Moderately." He drew a chair to the table. "One way and another, I've had a longish day."

"Was father very troublesome?"

"Not exactly troublesome." Perceptibly, Gerald hesitated. "He's rather bothered, you know. This affair of your brother's!"

"You said just now that Alan's affair was only part of the trouble."

"I don't think I used the word 'trouble'."

"Bother—then?" The idea that she must fence with her own husband began to irritate Hermione. Looking up at him, she perceived that his lips were compressed, resolute against confidences. "Gerald," she went on, "I wish you wouldn't treat me like a stranger. If you and father discussed *my* affairs——"

"They weren't entirely yours."

"Did father ask you not to tell me?"

"No."

"Then why this reticence?"

She smiled at him; and he—a little impressed by the intelligence of her cross-examination—smiled suddenly in reply.

"Your father," he said, putting down his empty glass, "seems to have a higher opinion of my business judgment than about my treatment of his daughter."

"You needn't be so cryptic." Her lips still smiled; but her heart experienced anew the vague discomfort of half-an-hour ago. "I won't ask questions if you don't want me to."

"It isn't that." His directness had its appeal. "It's only that I dislike talking before I've come to a decision. Besides—this isn't only our affair. It's the boy's."

"Arthur's?"

"Precisely."

"So it was that wretched settlement," thought Hermione—her pale cheeks flushing. "How dared father bring that up again? As if Gerald couldn't be trusted——" And the suddenness of the thought startled her into saying: "I hope you told father to mind his own business?"

"I can't imagine anyone telling your father to do that." Cranston, pleased at the expressed partizanship, hesitated once more. Then, frankly, he went on: "As a matter of fact, the question of my making some provision for the boy didn't come up until quite late. I rather brought it on by suggesting that your father should join our Board. He seemed to think, in

view of what I told him about the affairs of the Company, that I was in a position to make a definite settlement on both of you——"

"On both of us?" Hermione's voice was low.

"It would have to be on both of you—at least, as I see it."

"But you're making me an allowance."

"Naturally. But your father's idea, and the more I think of it the more I am inclined to agree with him, is that you ought to have something more than an allowance—money of your own."

"But the allowance *is* my own. You don't even ask me how I spend it."

"Of course I don't. Spending it is your business; in the same way that making it is mine. Still—there's a good deal in what your father said. When a man assumes obligations, he's got to go through with them."

Cranston fell silent, his eyes on his wife. Sitting there, the wood-fire glowing on her pale cheeks, she made a picture of loveliness. Yet his thoughts were not of love. To him, the picture seemed only part of his own life-plan. That Hermione, by tacitly opposing her father's suggestion, should once again demonstrate how much her outlook differed from the outlook of those other, greedier women, no longer surprised him. He said to himself, naïvely simple: "Of course she's different, she's my *wife*. Rorkton's right. Even if it weren't a question of his joining the Board, I ought to protect her—and her son—against every possible eventuality."

But Hermione's thoughts—she, too, had fallen silent—no longer ran on the difference between Gerald and other males. For a moment, she saw him as he was—the actual man. Without love, perhaps—yet without guile. Primitive—direct—efficient. Mechanism if one liked—yet an admirable mechanism. Reliable. Functioning without clatter, without heat. "Safety," she thought. "Yes—I've won safety." Then the moment passed; and with its passing came a bitterness—the old ache to be loved, recklessly, without safety.

"Well?" he asked suddenly. "Well, what's your opinion? Tell me. I'd like to know it before I give you mine."

"My opinion?" Startled in mid-thought, she could only repeat his first words. She wanted to say: "I haven't an opinion. And even if I had one, it isn't fair to ask me for it." She wanted to say: "If our marriage was just a bargain, I for my part won't go back on that bargain." Despite the old ache, she wanted, most of all, to say: "I'm happy—content to trust

in you, Gerald." But, somehow, she could say none of those things. Somehow, she could only look at him . . . pleasurably, her eyes fascinated by the implacability of his manhood.

"Well?" he asked again.

And at that, finally, the innermost of her heart found tongue. "If it were only for myself, Gerald," she faltered, "I wouldn't let you settle a penny on me. But since you tell me it's for Arthur's sake, my opinion is that you should do it."

"I'm going to," said Gerald Cranston—and, vaguely, as his eyes, smiling again, met hers, Hermione knew illusion; the illusion that now and here, in the presence of this man from whom she had sought only safety, she had re-found love.

For her, that vague illusion lasted out the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ 1

INEVITABLY—since the love of her subconscious seeking was not that false light which blazes reasonlessly between a darkness and a dawn, but the true flame which, once kindled, only death can wholly extinguish—the Lady Hermione Cranston's momentary illusion about her second husband did not endure.

Nevertheless—and perhaps all the more because she repressed all thought of his physical person—her interest in " the coal-merchant's " personality did not abate. The puzzle of his life and character, his curious relentlessnesses, his curious tendernesses (or were those tendernesses, too, illusion?), his sense of duty, his colossal industry, the mysterious multifarious activities which plunged him daily into that unknown money-vortex which was the " City "—all these continued to intrigue her.

Of those City activities, she neither knew, nor asked to know, anything. For the moment, their mystery sufficed the husband-image her mind had made—an image no longer of flesh and blood, but once again, as it had been before the betraying thought, " He's quite handsome," started illusion in her, of mechanism.

How surely, how smoothly, how efficiently that mechanical image of a husband performed its functions! How easily—as she thought—it conjured up, within three weeks of the night she had banished from memory, the fifty thousand pounds which, as the short, bald-headed little man with the Wellington nose and the face like brown parchment in whose office she signed the deed of settlement, informed her, would one day, " though, under the joint trusteeship of yourself and your husband, you have the income of it for life, Lady Hermione," be irrevocably Arthur's. How unemotionally, counter-signing that settlement, it commanded, between a pen-stroke and a pen-stroke: " And Mr. Hardcastle—about Aldford Street. I've made arrangements to pay off the temporary mortgage; and settle the whole thing, lock stock and barrel, on my wife. You might get that deed

drawn up, too. The sooner the better. Tillotson will send you on a schedule of the more important furniture during the course of the afternoon."

Emerging from that interview, Hermione tried to thank the image ; but before she could frame her words, Havers and the Clement Talbot had whirled it away. " I ought to tell him how grateful I am," she reproached herself, watching the car disappear among the streaming traffic.

Yet self-reproach, she knew, was unnecessary, unjustified. However unemotional their relations, she had never yet denied herself to Gerald. While in other ways, practical ways, her part of their unspoken bargain had been fulfilled to the letter. That part, moreover—the work-a-day social-existence part—she enjoyed. Except for his time, Gerald grudged her nothing ; and as the house off Park Lane (her own house, now !) grew nearer and nearer to final completion, as Harrison's occupation-army of masons, electricians, plasterers and plumbers gave way, by the end of March, before the onslaughts of upholsterers, furniture-movers, and finally charladies, every minute of her days provided its fresh delight.

She grew house-proud, not boastfully—boastfulness was not in her—but with that irresistible impulse to display her treasures which no true house-wife can forego ; so that, in the April days which preceded their move, more than one luncheon-guest—Angela Hemmingway, wide-eyed in admiration, among them—found themselves willy-nilly companions of her afternoon walks from the Ritz to Aldford Street.

" It'll cost the earth to run," remarked Angela Hemmingway. " Though I suppose, when one marries a millionaire, little things like household books don't matter. Still—even millionaires have servant troubles."

" Gerald won't," retorted Hermione. " They'll be too frightened of him to idle, and too well paid to give notice." And she smiled a little, remembering how the " coal-merchant " who, rather to her surprise, had insisted on engaging the entire staff, male and female, himself, had reduced that most aristocratic of butlers " Mr. Smithers " (wages—a hundred-and-twenty a year, and all found) to a state of abject submission within five minutes of his pompous appearance into the " office-room " at the Ritz.

" There's no reason," explained Gerald, after the engaged Smithers had taken his departure, " why a house shouldn't run as smoothly as an office. The principle's the same. Pick the best workers ; pay them a little more than they can get anywhere else ; and get rid of them the moment they don't do their jobs."

He got rid of three—including a *chef* whose kitchen-maid kept him waiting five minutes for his eight o'clock breakfast—within four days of their taking up their new quarters ; and after that a great peace brooded in the white-tiled basement of Fifteen A. Aldford Street, which, once more quoting Angela, who billeted herself on them for two nights, " was the best small hotel she had ever stayed at."

§ 2

At five-thirty precisely of a warm June evening, the proprietor of that hotel dismounted from the Armstrong-Siddeley which had replaced his Clement-Talbot ; passed through the mahogany front-door ; handed hat, stick and gloves to the tamed Smithers ; cast one swift glance at the florist's men who were wreathing the black marble pillars of the square hall with smilax and jasmine ; commanded, " Bring me some tea to my study, and tell her ladyship that, unless she wants me particularly, I'd rather not be disturbed " ; and strode through the duck's-egg-green-and-gold panelled morning-room into his own sanctum.

The sanctum in Aldford Street marked—even as Gerald Cranston had planned on the morning of his marriage—a distinct decorative advance from the heterogeneously furnished office-room of his bachelor days at the Ritz. Curtains of cigar-brown-velvet, not yet drawn, circled the big bay window which gave on to the street. Opposite the window an eighteenth-century lantern clock, flanked either side by vases of black Wedgwood, ticked on the scrolled marble chimney-piece. Five Brangwyn etchings decorated the lemon-tinted walls. The flat-topped mahogany desk under the alabaster centre-light was genuine First Empire, the carpet an Aubusson. Chippendale had fashioned the few chairs. But the files which occupied the low cedar bookshelves, the letter-lock safe in the corner opposite the white painted door, the three telephones, and the closed typewriter-table revealed the apartment for what it was—a work-room.

Within three minutes Smithers, followed by a footman in silver-buttoned livery, appeared with the ordered tea.

" Begging your pardon, sir," asked Smithers, his plump clean-shaven face one vast deference as he supervised the arrangement of the silver tray on its mahogany stand, " but her ladyship asked me to remind you of the reception to-night and that dinner would be served at a quarter to eight."

" Quite so, Smithers. We're dining in here, I believe."

" Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll let you know when I'm through."

Cranston dismissed his butler, and attacked the tea hungrily. His thoughts were still on the business which had been occupying his mind and body throughout a lunchless day—the business of finally selecting sites for his coal-depots and his order-offices. For his distribution scheme—Bewsher once retired from the Board and Rorkton elected to fill the vacancy—had progressed at speed. Already the bank had accepted his personal guarantee for the fifty-thousand pound overdraft; already the lorries were on order, and the choices of a manager filed down to three. Already, too—sheer luck, that!—a cut-and-dried distributing organisation, small and short of capital but a perfect mine of expansion-possibilities, had fallen into his hands. "By the time decontrol comes," he decided, "we'll be more than ready."

Whereupon, having finished his hasty meal, he cleared his mind of the coal problem; and, picking up a red-backed monograph from the miscellany of paper-covered volumes in the cedar book-shelf on the right of the fireplace, sat down to study his latest, most secret, venture, Tin. For, although not even the man who was taking boat next day for Lagos knew whence came the money to finance his expedition, the Marankari Concessions Syndicate had been re-formed; and behind it, unknown because, "These Society people talk too much, sir; that's why I'd rather my half-share were registered in your name," stood Gerald Cranston.

The majority shareholder of Marankari Concessions read on, for a full half-hour, of "pegmatite dykes" and "overburden" and "zinc-blende" and "rolled fragments of topaz"; till, at last, his brain tiring a little, he put the monograph back in its place. "If Ibbotsleigh finds that lode," he thought, "I may reach my first million."

The secrecy of this new venture pleased him. The very fact that he had hidden it even from Tillotson gave him a queer foretaste of the ultimate money-power. "In the dark," he mused. "That's how the big men work." Then, his mind still running on secrecy, he took a tiny steel key from the chain at his waistcoat pocket; twirled the combination knob of the safe; opened it; unlocked his private drawer; and drew out the leather-bound ledger, also locked, which contained the statement of his fortune.

That book, too, was secret even from Tillotson. In it, page after meticulous page of Cranston's own handwriting recorded financial success.

He selected a second key from his key-chain; unlocked the

volume, and glanced through the transactions of the past six months. It seemed as though, since his marriage to Hermione, everything had turned to gold. "Growth!" he thought. "Growth!"

The figures fascinated his eyes. It was as though by merely looking at them, they waxed and waxed across the cash-lined pages. "Power!" he thought. "What is power? Why should I crave it?" And again: "But I have power—the only power—money!"

He locked the book, put it away in the safe, and strode out from the sanctum, into the hall.

The coat-racks were up. The florist's men had just finished their task. A maid, on her knees, was helping them clear away the débris of leaves and wire. He passed on, into the low westward-aspected dining-room.

Here, too, men and women were at work—setting the long buffet-table, the round supper-tables, with glass and silver, with roses and strawberries. Pleased but unsmiling, Cranston eyed —through the open windows—his Roman garden: canvas-roofed for the night, the fountain playing in its marble-basin, chairs and tables set here and there on the flags, the statue in the wall-niche jasmine-wreathed as the pillars of the hall. "Hermione's scheme," he thought. "Clever!"

Continuing inspection, he came up the oak-balustered staircase to the square first-floor landing, where he and his wife would receive their guests.

The landing had been banked with red and white roses. Their heady perfume gave him pleasure. Yet headier, more pleasurable in his nostrils, was the perfume of his own success.

At last, reluctantly, he went upstairs to change. Undressing, his keen ears just caught, through the curtained door which divided their apartments, the occasional low murmur of Hermione's orders to Syrett. The sound stimulated further thought in him. His mind reverted to the morning of their wedding-day. Now, as then, the physical Hermione was relegated to the background of his consciousness. Yet the thought of their wedding-day gave him pleasure. Marriage, as all his ventures, had turned out according to plan. The disciplined home of their joint making was an indubitable success.

"I did right," he thought, shaving himself smooth with the old sure strokes of his long-bladed razor. "Better one clean bargain; better one businesslike, orderly marriage such as ours, than all those other marriages of bodily passion and sickly senti-

mentality which fools call love! Love! As though there were room for love in the world of to-day . . ."

On that thought, Gerald Cranston finished his shaving; wiped his razor, stropped it; and, returning to the bedroom, began to draw the studded shirt over his head. A knock interrupted the process. "One minute," he called irritably through the stiff linen. "Who is it?"

"Only me, sir." Rennie entered.

"Begging your pardon, sir," went on Rennie; "but Nurse says, could you spare a moment before dinner."

"Why?" Cranston's voice was still irritable. "Is anything wrong?"

"Not exactly, sir." Rennie smiled. "But Sir Arthur says he'll no' go to sleep until you've been up to him."

"All right. Tell Nurse I'll be with her in ten minutes."

The valet went out, and his master resumed his dressing. The incident was natural enough. Ever since the removal of Hermione's child from Great Cumberland Place to Aldford Street, it had been Cranston's habit—a habit first dictated by a sense of duty but latterly by a growing interest—to visit him nightly. Nevertheless, as he hastened the finish of his dressing, Arthur's step-father felt vaguely annoyed. "Funny animals, kids," he mused. "They're like dogs or horses. If the same thing doesn't happen to them at the same hour every day, they feel the world's coming to an end. But I can't have Arthur brought up that way . . ."

To-night, as always, the thought of Arthur's upbringing caused him a certain anxiety—the anxiety lest Tony Cosgrave's boy should turn out like Tony Cosgrave, a ne'er-do-well. To-night, as always, when, looking taller than ever in his smooth-fitting evening kit, he strode deliberately across the clean, hospital-like night-nursery, Nurse, rising bear-like from her seat by the white enamelled bedstead, noticed the little rasp which that anxiety put into his voice.

"Well, youngster," he said gruffly. "What's the meaning of this? Why aren't you asleep?"

"Didn't want to go to sleep," retorted the child.

"Why not? What's the trouble?"

"You're the trouble, Steppy. I waited for you—and you didn't come."

"Who taught you to call me that name?" Cranston, a trifle amused, looked down on the tiny, yellow-haired, brown-eyed figure.

"Nanny."

"And didn't Nanny tell you to go to sleep?"

"Yes. She said," the brown eyes blinked drowsily, "that I wasn't to wait for you, because you was busy. In course, I didn't believe her——"

"But you've got to believe your nurse."

"Why?"

"Because I tell you to." The discipline-rasp was still in Cranston's voice.

"I do, mostly," the brown eyes shewed no fear, "but I didn't believe her this time. You see," confidentially, "you always do come. So I thought——"

"It's too late for thinking, youngster." The big man, a little moved by the blind confidence in his regularity, bent down to pat his step-son's warm cheek. "Now you do as you're told—and go to sleep."

"All right, Steppy. Good-night."

"Good-night, youngster."

Arthur turned over on his right side, and in another moment was dreaming.

"I'm sorry I had to disturb you, sir," whispered the nurse. "But he's getting that self-willed . . ."

"Keep quiet, please. I don't want him woken again."

For a while Gerald Cranston stood silent, looking down on the sleeping baby. At last, quietly, he tip-toed from the room. "The kid's got pluck," he thought: then, abruptly: "Pity he's not mine!"

And with that, there came over him a feeling of disquietude. So far this marriage edifice of his, as all his edifices, had risen according to plan. Yet one stone of it, the very coping-stone, was still to set. What if that coping-stone—the first-born of the family he had planned to found—were never to materialize? What if, by him, Hermione were to have no child?

Sharply, and for the first time, he grew conscious of a longing so acute that it was almost pain. What did it avail a man to be master of his own fate, master of millions, if no man-child of his own siring should come after him, no flesh of his flesh inherit the trophies he had captured from the battle of life? Of what avail were all the luxuries of this luxurious house, down whose staircase he was even now passing, if Hermione, who had given a child to Cosgrave, should give no child to him?

Swiftly as it had come, the disquietude went from Gerald Cranston. Yet a little of that longing for a man-child which to some men is almost pain was still with him when Hermione—a tiara blazing on her dark hair, the pearls of his giving

resplendent as tears on the bosom which peeped white above the ivory of her gown—appeared to join him at the little flower-decked table which Smithers had set out for them in his sanctum.

And almost, in that moment, it was as though he looked upon her with new eyes—seeing, not the other party to his marriage-bargain, not the partner of his disciplined home, but a woman who owed him a debt.

§ 3

Meanwhile another man's eyes, Gordon Ibbotsleigh's, were on Hermione; on a photograph of herself which she had signed and given him, long and long ago, in the far away days when she had been the wife of his friend.

She was no more wife of his friend. She was wife of his enemy. And in that thought, lay madness.

But to-morrow he would escape from madness. To-morrow he would be away—away at her father's bidding—for the hot and barren uplands of Northern Nigeria, away beyond Zaria, where the Baro-Kano railway peters out from railhead into untracked Hausa-land. How gladly, how mad-gladly he would escape—escape from this stuffy, over-populated London, where a man, hating, might not slay, and loving, might not possess!

Yes—it was good, good to be going; good to have donned for the last time in many months the stiff-shirted uniform of Mayfair; good to see, all about these unhappy rooms of Mayfair, the tokens of departure—to see, there, at the foot of the bed, his old cabin-trunk, battered by the coolies of half-a-world, yet still serviceable, still labelled for service; and there, up-ended against the patterned wall-paper in the alcove by the un-lit gas-fire, his rifle-case; and there, through the open doorway of the narrow-panelled sitting room, where he had so often sat thinking of Hermione, his Willesden-canvassed camp-kit, and the corded instrument-boxes, and the new theodolite.

To-morrow—to-morrow, he would hear the call of the sea and of the lands beyond the sea. To-morrow night, steady-pacing the steady decks to the steady throb of the engines below, he would begin to forget this woman of the photograph—this woman who, selling herself to Gerald Cranston, had robbed him of all faith in womanhood. But to-night, he could neither hear the call; nor hearing it, forget. To-night, this love which was half hatred, this hatred which was wholly love, goaded him as the Fulani goad their oxen. Goaded him to madness!

Slowly, the heat of madness passed; slowly, his eyes still

on the photograph, Gordon Ibbotsleigh took his silk hat, his silk-lined overcoat from the bed, and, locking the door of his flat behind him, sauntered downstairs into Burlington Street.

It was early yet—barely five minutes to eight by the Burlington House clock. Angela—why, in God's name, had he accepted Angela's invitation?—never dined till half-past. He would stroll to his club.

Strolling, overcoat over arm, down Bond Street and into Piccadilly, he remembered the London of his early youth—the London he had shared with Tony. That London was dead—dead as his friend. The Cranstons, the damned profiteering Cranstons, had killed it, as they had killed Tony. These girls, now—these young girls walking two-by-two along the Piccadilly pavement—were not as the girls whom he and Tony had known. Their eyes held no laughter. Why should they laugh, seeing that London—the old and the care-free London—was dead?

He came to his club; but that, too, seemed a place of death—cold, inhospitable, haunted by the ghosts of men he had known . . . Men! There were no real men left in England. Only slack-lipped youngsters and hard-faced profiteers—profiteers like this Cranston, who had stolen the woman he loved.

He ordered himself a drink, two drinks, three drinks; drained them in gulps; paid for them; sauntered back into Piccadilly. Why in God's name had he promised to dine with Angela, to take her on to Hermione's? Why need he see Hermione again? Why couldn't he forget, forget? . . .

CHAPTER NINE

§ 1

NATURE dowers a small minority of her females—usually those who are more fair and kind than altogether wise in their conduct towards the opposite sex—with an aptitude for the handling of tempestuous men, which is seldom shared, though frequently envied, by their straighter-laced sisters. And that aptitude was Angela Hemmingway's.

Rising, one perfect little arm outstretched, to greet Gordon Ibbotsleigh as he came, dandified and moustache-twirling, across the black carpet of the low, softly illuminated, Chinese-papered sitting room which monopolized the entire ground floor of her " doll's house " off Curzon Street, that aptitude warned her—despite the cynical composure that masked his sallow, weather-beaten face—of the suppressed nerve-storm in him ; and instantly, instinctively, almost as a mental-nurse with some fractious patient, she set herself the task of allaying it.

" You're nice and early," she began (his erratic wanderings had delayed him, so that the little red-lacquer clock on her red lacquer mantelpiece already marked the quarter-to-nine), re-seating herself after his hand-clasp and patting the low, cushion-covered divan, above which a painted-glass lantern glowed orange against the black-and-gold of the wall. " Come and sit here. We've time for a cigarette before dinner. And a cocktail ! They're over there—by the Buddha. I mixed them myself."

" Thanks." Gordon Ibbotsleigh fetched the two cocktail-glasses, handed over one, swigged off the other ; drew a thin gold case from his hip-pocket, a thinner gold match-box from the pocket of his white waistcoat ; offered Angela a cigarette, which she accepted in silence ; lit up, and sat down beside her.

Already, her reception of him had had its effect. Already, he had decided it infinitely preferable to take dinner with this delicate, doll-like, blue-eyed, golden-haired woman whose *diamanté* frock contrasted daringly as a diamond against black

velvet with the darkly sensuous orientalism of her surroundings, than alone in his ghost-haunted mausoleum of a club.

Angela, talking little, smoked on—and the effect grew. Gradually, the sheer animal magnetism of her soothed his excited imagination. Gradually his body lost its tenseness. Soon, chatting cynically, it seemed to him as though the madness which, for weeks now, had been threatening, like some black cloud, to obscure his brain, had passed.

He lit himself another cigarette, and continued to chat—feeling a little sorry for that other, madder Gordon Ibbotsleigh, picturing him puppet of a modern melodrama, forced, love-lorn and heroic, into dangerous exile. "I'm doing the right thing," ran his secret thoughts. "I'm cutting the painter—cutting myself adrift—getting out of things—going away into the wild. God, but it's hard, having to give up all this—charming women, cocktails, civilization, Mayfair. But it's the right, the only thing. And it isn't for ever. One day, when I've made a fortune, when I've succeeded in forgetting, I'll come back . . ."

"How about dinner, Gordon?" Angela, sensing the propitious instant, raised a languorous hand to press the little jade bell-push above her head; and almost immediately a silent man-servant parted heavy dragon-scrolled curtains to reveal, in the other half of the sitting room, a small intimate dinner-table, already candle-lit and garnished with two dishes of hammered silver containing caviare.

The short dinner, exquisitely cooked and as exquisitely served; the wine; the brandy which followed the wine, and the coffee which followed the brandy, completed the task that Angela had set herself.

"You're a good sort," Ibbotsleigh told her, when White left them alone. "A devilish good sort. I felt as hipped as blazes when I arrived."

"That was fairly obvious." Angela, pouring more coffee, smiled reflectively at her own images in the two black circles of their tiny Chinese cups. "And not altogether unexpected."

"I wasn't hipped for any particular reason."

"My dear man," Angela smiled again, angelically, "do have a little respect for my womanly intelligence. When someone of your calibre decides quite suddenly to spend the best part of a year in Africa—Nigeria is in Africa, isn't it?—there's always a particular reason."

"Not in my case."

"Really. Now I should have thought that in your case"—passing over the coffee-cup, she hesitated a purposeful second—"the reason was even more patent than usual."

"Nonsense! I'm going to Africa—Nigeria rather—on business."

"Naturally." Her blue eyes widened at him under golden lashes. "One has to have some excuse. And business is distinctly more fashionable than big-game shooting. In a way, you know, my dear Gordon, you've got more brains than people give you credit for. It was distinctly clever of you to resuscitate—what's the name of the concern?—Marankari Concessions—and the family tin-mine."

"I didn't resuscitate the thing." Ibbotsleigh, rather taken aback by her unexpected knowledge, sought refuge in inspection of his cigar-ash. "And who told you about it?"

"Oh," parried Angela, "it's more or less common property."

"It oughtn't to be."

"How thrilling!" Laughter gurgled in the delicious throat. "A secret tin-mine! Now, who told *me* the secret? I'm not quite sure that I remember. It may have been Doxford. I met him at a dance the other night. Yes, thinking it over, it was Doxford."

"And what else," the mining-engineer recovered his composure, "did Doxford tell you?"

"Only that his father was financing the syndicate—is syndicate the right word?—and that he, personally, hadn't much faith in it. Of course, Gerry's rich enough to——"

"Gerry!" Ibbotsleigh's interruption was harsh. "If by Gerry you mean Cranston, you can take it from me that you're on the wrong tack. *He* hasn't got anything to do with it—thank God!"

"So it's as bad as that, is it? You poor dear!" A little, limp hand crept dexterously across the table and laid itself over Gordon Ibbotsleigh's. "I didn't know—or I wouldn't have ragged you."

The hand withdrew dexterously as it had arrived. But the memory of its soft contact lingered; and Ibbotsleigh, moved by the unexpected sympathy, forgot to be resentful. One couldn't, after all, resent Angela's curiosity—any more than one could resent the curiosity of a child or a kitten. Besides, Angela—for all her apparent childishness—had always been the soul of reticence.

"I expect I'll get over it," he said cynically.

On which there ensued a long silence, broken at last by Angela's sighed, "It's hell being in love. I wish you weren't going away."

"Why? What difference do *I* make."

"Only," another sigh, "that we're both in the same boat."

Momentarily her meaning escaped him. Then, quietly, he asked: "Cranston?"

"Yes."

For a long while they sat wordless, their eyes on one another; till, once again, the caressing hand outstretched itself across the shining wood of the table; and the woman said, "I shouldn't have told you if you hadn't been going away, if I hadn't known that you were in love with his wife. You'll keep my poor little secret, won't you? I'll keep both yours."

The hand withdrew; and suddenly, strangely, hopefully, Gordon Ibbotsleigh laughed.

"Lambs to the slaughter," laughed Gordon Ibbotsleigh. "It's time we both went to that damned reception. Yes, I'll keep your secret and wish you luck."

"Then it's a bargain. Lambs to the slaughter! I like that. But this little lamb's a sight. You'll wait—won't you?—till she's powdered her nose."

Swiftly, closing the black-lacquered door behind her, Angela went from the room; and for an appreciable moment Ibbotsleigh sat still as the malignant soap-stone idol which faced him from its bracket on the Chinese wall. Once more the cloud of madness obscured his brain. Once more he poured himself brandy from the silver-filigreed decanter; tossed it down.

"I'm quite ready, White," called Angela's voice down the narrow staircase. "Get a taxi, please."

The silent manservant found them a taxi. Handing her, gloved, cloaked and fanned, into its dark recesses, he laughed again. "Good hunting," laughed Gordon Ibbotsleigh. "Good hunting, comrade!"

Angela, however, had finished with confidences. Manners—she could, when she chose, be as great a lady as any of the Rawleys—clothed her like a garment. "You needn't be vulgar, Gordon," she snubbed him.

He accepted the snub, sitting moody till they made Aldford Street—already a pack of cars, with here and there, anachronisms among them, carriage-horses, heads tossing scornfully at the bearing reins as though to say, "How this petrol smells. Thank Heaven, we're still gentle-folk in Belgravia."

"This *is* pre-war," murmured Angela, eyeing the horses. "Don't look so sulky, Gordon, you'll upset Gerry's duchesses."

Angela's snap-judgment of the party-atmosphere proved more or less accurate. It was pre-war—up to a point. Even before their taxi crawled alongside the big square porch, from which

a red awning and a red carpet ran between thin poles to and beyond the edge of the pavement, they heard, through the open windows of the first-floor drawing-rooms, the sounds of vocal music—followed, just as they passed under the red awning, by a rattle of decorous hand-claps. While, in the hall and in the supper room beyond, even a casual glance at the faces of the women betrayed an unusual proportion of Victorians.

Ibbotsleigh, handing in his hat and coat to an attendant, gave himself up to cynical contemplation of the throng. The Rawley element—he could see—predominated; but it had been laced, rather strangely, with High Finance. He spotted a well-known Jew, a Greek banker, the wife of a recently peeraged timber-magnate. Here and there, too, were other notorieties—a Society painter with spouse, and a matinée idol, without one. Amused, he almost forgot to hate Cranston.

But when Angela, a jade-green ostrich-feather fan open on its ivory sticks as though to shield her breast from the crowd, joined him in the jostle of mounting guests between the oak balusters of the staircase, and to the loud announcement of, "The Honourable Mrs. Hemmingway—Mr. Gordon Ibbotsleigh" he came face to face with Hermione and her husband, the old hatred blazed up like a flame. Momentarily he saw the pair of them—the tall dark-haired woman and the taller tawny-headed man—through the red haze of murder.

The haze blew clear; but when, Angela at his side, he made his way through the pack of well-dressed folk about his host and hostess into the long double drawing-rooms behind them, Cranston's deliberate "Evening, Ibbotsleigh. Glad you weren't too busy to come," still rang like an insult in his ear.

"Glad!" he thought. "The swine."

A fresh singer had mounted the music-dais; and perforce, wedged in the crowd, they had to hear him out.

"That's Velluto," whispered a voice behind them; "Aunt Lollipop's latest discovery. Fat brute! I'd like to have him in my squadron for a month. We'd sweat some of the adipose tissue off his tenorial throat."

Ibbotsleigh turned to find Alan Rawley at his elbow. The young soldier was in high fettle. "Picked up a packet at Sandown to-day," he confided when—the song being over and Angela wandered off to join a group of relatives, Doxford among them, in the far corner of the music room—the pair found themselves more or less alone. Then, linking an arm through Ibbotsleigh's, he continued, curling his blond moustache between thumb and third finger of his free hand, his catalogue of the guests.

"And that's mother-in-law," finally drawled the Honourable Alan, indicating the little old lady in a high, lace-throated black frock, who was holding her conversational own with one of "Gerry's duchesses" on the big Empire settee by the open window. "Not a bad old bird, either. Hermione's rather fond of her. Care to be introduced?"

"No, thanks." Ibbotsleigh managed to free himself from the detaining arm, and eventually to shake off Alan. He was in no mood for introductions. The people, the flowers, the music, the whole social atmosphere of the gathering, fretted his overwrought nerves. He wanted, suddenly, to escape.

On the landing, Cranston and Hermione were still receiving belated guests. The red haze blinded him once more as he sidled past them down the flower-banked staircase. "God!" he thought. "God! I can't stand this."

Then the red haze blew clear again, revealing, at the foot of the stairs, Rorkton—dignified in frilled shirt and old-fashioned swallow-tail. The Earl, unusually affable, greeted him with a warm: "Well met, Ibbotsleigh. Your last night in London, if I'm not mistaken? Excellent. We'll utilize the opportunity to drink a glass of my son-in-law's good wine to your success."

The mining-engineer, cursing under his breath at the impossibility of refusal, accepted the invitation; and—the Earl leading the way through the supper-room windows—they found a free table in the canvas-roofed Roman garden.

"Champagne, please," commanded the Earl of a passing attendant.

They drank; but the golden bubbles tasted sour between Ibbotsleigh's teeth. Listening to the old man's highfalutin' little speech about Marankari, he wondered fleetingly if the old man were only a figurehead for Cranston; and so wondering, started in on a gingerly cross-examination, which began: "I hope you're not setting too high hopes on this little trip of mine, sir. Tin's always a gamble. That's why, in many ways, I should feel happier if we were gambling with public money—rather than with your own."

"Nothing venture, nothing have, Ibbotsleigh," retorted the Earl, his gray eyes twinkling shrewdly across the lifted champagne-glass. "Here's prosperity. And let me assure you of one thing—that if the venture does prosper, I shall be the last to grudge you your share of it."

"I know that, sir, and appreciate it. All the same," Ibbotsleigh continued to probe, "putting my own interests on one side, I wish that Marankari weren't so essentially a family concern."

"Family concern!" The interpolation did the Earl's diplomacy credit.

"I understood, sir, that Doxford had a small share."

"Ah. I see. But what difference does it make if Marankari *is* a family concern?"

"Only that it increases one's responsibility."

"How so?"

"Presuming," the mining-engineer, a second glass at his elbow, grew more daring, "that more money were needed; I should hesitate——"

"To ask me?"

"Exactly."

The Earl—though a trifle uncomfortable at the secrecy Cranston had imposed on him—neither flinched nor lied. "Isn't that rather rushing our fences?" he said. "Of course, if you find you require more money, you must cable for it. Should that happen, you can rely on me to do my best. Let's hope, though, that the five thousand will see you through. I'm not a millionaire, you know; and my son, Cyril," smiling, "hates writing cheques."

"I'll do my best, sir." Ibbotsleigh, his momentary suspicions dispelled by the apparent frankness, rose to go. The Earl, however, his discomfort vanishing at the success of his prevarication, continued garrulous; and presently a perfect avalanche of guests, trooping supperwards, baffled all possible exit from the Roman garden.

To Ibbotsleigh, the close canvas-roofed place seemed like a prison. His nerves were still over-wrought, vibrant as fiddle-strings. But the drink was at work in him; so that impulse no longer urged escape. Why, from whom should he escape? From Cranston? He had no fear of Cranston! From Hermione? Surely not! Wasn't this his chance—his last and only chance—of bidding her goodbye, of telling her . . .

And then, suddenly, he grew conscious of her presence. She was no longer with Cranston. She was alone—there by the doorway beyond the crowded supper-tables. His Hermione. Tony's Hermione. Bought. Bought like a beast in the market-place. Christ! how could one bear it?

Rudely, abruptly, with never an excuse to the Earl, Gordon Ibbotsleigh went from the wine-table. Abruptly, rudely, he began to push his way through the crowd. Curse the crowd! Would they never let one through? Curse these over-powdered, over-scented women; these over-polite, over-bearing men. It seemed to him as though the whole boiling of them were leagued

in a conspiracy—a conspiracy to keep him from Hermione. "Blast them," he thought, the drink raging. "Blast them!"

At last, still raging though outwardly controlled, he caught Hermione's eye; smiled at her; won to her side.

"Enjoying yourself, Gordon?" she asked lightly.

"Naturally." Somehow he managed his voice. "Your party's a triumph."

"Rather a tropical triumph." She flirted a miniature fan at her flushed cheeks. "If you were a real friend, you'd get me an ice."

He fetched her an ice, which she ate standing. The movement of her warm hands, of her moist lips fascinated him. Silent, he remembered only the older, happier days—the days when she had been free . . .

"Aren't you tired?" he asked suddenly. "These shows are a bit of a strain.

"A little." Her eyes smiled. "But the worst's over. They'll have to look after themselves now. Tell me—how soon are you going away?"

"To-morrow." It hurt him like hell that she should not have remembered.

"How stupid of me. Of course it's to-morrow. But you won't be away long."

"A year. More than that, perhaps." His look troubled her. She recollected, a little guiltily, her promise that their friendship should continue. "I ought to have had him to dinner," she thought.

"More than that perhaps," he repeated.

"Then this is a goodbye visit."

"Yes—it's a goodbye visit."

The Greek banker, hurrying to make his early adieux, interrupted them. "*Charmé*," he murmured through his beard. "*Charmé, Madame—et desolé de partir.*" Other guests came up, chattering. Gordon, however, stood his ground. Instinctively Hermione realized his wish to be alone with her. Instinctively she resented the wish. Yet, in instinct's despite, she could not help feeling sorry for him, anxious about him. Past knowledge seemed to tell her that he was restless, dissatisfied, in that peculiar state which had driven him more than once on strange courses.

Supper was over; and the crowd, moving like sheep, drove them from the doorway into the hall. A woman came up pleading, "Dear Lady Hermione, the music isn't all over, is it? I've only just come, and I do so want to hear Velluto sing." She

answered the woman, " He'll be singing again in a few minutes " ; and—the beetle-browed tenor appearing—introduced them. The pair went off, admirer and admired, up the staircase. Other enthusiasts followed. Presently, from above, came the first notes of the accompanist. " Don't run away yet," begged Ibbotsleigh, still at her side.

The mining-engineer's voice was under complete control ; but the hands behind his back were trembling. To him, Hermione's fingers on the oak newel-post of the staircase seemed the fingers of fate. His hands yearned to clasp them, to hold her from leaving him.

More people, summoned by the first chords of the music, came trooping past. Vaguely, he recognised the Earl, Cranston's mother, Angela. It seemed to him as though there were a smile, a smile of encouragement and understanding, in Angela's blue eyes. He knew the hall emptying, emptying . . . But still those white fingers clasped the dark oak ; still, one foot on the staircase, Hermione stood hesitant . . . Looking on her, his lips went dry. He heard himself pleading through those dry lips, " Don't go ! Don't go, Hermione," as the first notes of Velluto's song came echoing down to them.

" But you mustn't keep me from my duties, Gordon."

" Give me five minutes—only five minutes. Alone with you. There's something—something I want to tell you before I go. I can't say it," his voice sank to a whisper, " here."

Once again instinct warned Hermione. She wanted to refuse, to say : " Don't be melodramatic, Gordon. Here's my hand. Here's luck to you. Goodbye." Yet once again—in instinct's despite—she felt sorry for her friend, anxious for him. Something in his eyes, some sombre fire, half-frightened, half-fascinated her. She remembered their old friendship, his curious violences, her power to soothe them.

" What do you want to tell me ? " she asked quietly.

" Something about myself. Don't grudge me five minutes. Remember, I'm going away—for a whole year, for more than a year."

" You're unreasonable, Gordon. But then "—Hermione's tone was light—" you always were."

She moved across the hall ; and he followed her, his pulses beating, into a green-and-gold panelled room. There, for the last time, he knew the impulse to escape from her. But already it was too late. Already she stood expectant of his confidences.

" Well, Gordon," she asked. " What do you want to tell me ? What's the trouble ? "

"There's no trouble." He spoke slowly, fumbling for his words. "I only wanted to say goodbye to you. Won't you sit down, Hermione?"

He drew a chair from the wall, and she accepted it. "I shall miss your—your friendship," he went on; and there was pathos in the harsh voice. "It's meant a good deal to me—more, perhaps, than you realize. Will you miss mine?"

"Of course I shall miss you, Gordon."

"I wonder." Looking down on her bent head, he began to fidget, first on one foot and then on the other. "Friendship between a single man and a married woman doesn't count for much."

Ibbotsleigh fell silent; and in that silence, electrically, some bell rang danger in Hermione's brain. Nervous, self-conscious, she rose to her feet. But neither nervousness nor self-consciousness betrayed itself in her voice.

"If that's all you have to tell me——" she began, smiling.

"It isn't." The tone of his answer struck the smile from her face. There was no pathos in that tone—only passion, passion vibrant and uncontrolled, passion that frightened her.

"Gordon," she began again. "Gordon—I must be going."

But now the black cloud of drink and his madness hung dark over Ibbotsleigh's soul. She made a movement to pass him; he would not let her by. He knew himself at breaking-point; knew the inhibitions snapping one by one in his brain. Desire came to him; and through the haze of his desire he saw her infinitely desirable. Her violet eyes, her lips scarlet against pallor, the little ears set close under the lustrous masses of her hair, the curved palms of her hands, the curve of her breasts outlined below the ivory silk of her dress—all these thrilled him to frenzy. Desire urged him to take her up in his arms, to hold her to him, to kiss her and kiss her till the lustrous head bent backwards from the white neck, and eyes, lips, hair, curve of hands and curve of bosom yielded themselves ravished to the fury of his caresses. Yet the last inhibition held; and all that was best in him made him fearful to lay hands on her . . .

"Don't go," he stammered. "Don't go yet."

For a moment, passion dumbed him. Then, low-voiced and passionate, he went on. "Don't you understand, Hermione? Can't you understand? I—I love you."

"Gordon!" The low voice of her recovered dignity lashed at him like a sjambok. "Are you crazy?"

"Crazy!" The sjambok stung—but might not stop him.

"Of course I'm crazy—crazy for your beauty—crazy with love—crazy with hatred. It's Cranston I hate, Cranston——"

Words went from him; went from them both. Sick, ashamed, horrified—for the look in Ibbotsleigh's eyes was the look that had been Tony's, bestial—Hermione could not bring herself to speak.

"Gordon," she said at last, "I thought you were my friend."

"Friend!" Speech came back to him, bitterly. "What's a married woman's friend? A lap-dog! Let's have done with pretences, Hermione. It isn't friendship I ask of you. It's love," his voice shook, "kisses—passion—yourself!" Then the last inhibition of his brain snapped; and in a second he was at grips with her. "Kiss me," he panted, his fingers hand-cuffing her wrists, "kiss me—I adore you."

At his touch, every nerve-cell in her screamed revolt. She wanted to cry out, to cry shame on him. But she could not—dared not cry out. She could only wrestle with him—wrestle frantic against those gripping fingers to guard her lips from defilement. "Beast!" muttered her lips. "Beast!"

And on that, suddenly, she knew the beast defeated. His fingers loosed their grip, and she flung away from him—outraged, the cold anger choking in her throat.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Sorry. I didn't mean——"

"Don't try to explain yourself, please, Gordon." Hermione's voice, when she found it, was a stranger's, pitiless, uninterested. "It's hardly worth while."

He watched her move past him, watched her open the door; knew that he must precede her through that door, go out of her house, out of her life; went.

§ 2

One hand clenched on the flower-twined balusters, Gerald Cranston's wife watched the man whom she had imagined her friend go out into the June night. Above her, Velluto still sang; but his grand voice hardly penetrated to her consciousness. Her consciousness was all of self—guilty.

She felt altogether shamed—by the stupidity which had allowed the man to trap her, by the indignity of her struggle with him, by every word he had spoken, by the whole abominable outrage on her hospitality and on her person. "*Amore!*" sang Velluto. . .

Love—faugh! She looked down at the wrists which still ached from the fierceness of Gordon's attack. His fingers had

left no marks on the blue-veined flesh, yet she felt as though that flesh were branded—branded indelibly.

"Fool!" she thought, her mind reverting to others who, in the years which had followed Tony's death, had pretended love for her. "Fool to have imagined him different." Those others, though, had never attempted violence. Whereas Gordon . . .

Her mind froze at the very thought of Gordon. She would never forget his eyes, bestial, crazy; his panting mouth. Thus might some dog to whom one had given one's trust, one's pity, have gone suddenly wolf, snapped at one with his fangs. Dog—yes. But not a man—not a sentient civilized man of one's own kind.

One could understand, be sorry for, forgive the dumb animal's reversion to the wild—but the man's, the articulate civilized man's, one could neither understand nor forgive. No, she could never forgive Gordon. Horribly, he had brought back all those horrors she had determined to forget. "*Amore!*" sang Velluto. Gordon's love, Tony's—faugh on them!

Velluto's song ceased to a rattle of hand-claps. Slowly, she made her way up the staircase. She knew herself afraid—of her guests, of herself, of Gerald. The sustaining consciousness of clothes went out of her. She imagined herself naked, dishevelled in her nakedness.

On the landing, guests all about him, stood her husband. Joining him, it came to her, idiotically, that she was in a slave-market; that all these people, her own people, the smiling affable people to whom her lips were even now making excuses for her absence, were eyeing her dishevelled nakedness.

Velluto, his duties over, bade her effusive goodbye. Automatically, she gave him her hand. Automatically, he raised it to his lips. "*Buona sera*, milady," declaimed Velluto. The touch of his waxed moustaches against her knuckles loosed the fountains of revulsion. It was as though the tenor's lips had branded her anew. Flashingly, she hated him—hated all men. All men were beasts—wolves—horrible. Their mannered hands, their mannered lips, their mannered eyes, only cloaked the lust of their desires. In an instant—had she not seen it?—loose but his lusts, and man became the savage, the reverted dog, mad for his human meat, ravenous. Faugh!

Tony, Gordon, Gerald—wherein lay the difference? Gerald—like Tony, like Gordon—needed her for the one purpose. Watching him with distrustful eyes as he moved hither and thither among the dwindling crowd, it seemed to her that she no longer watched a stranger. Him, all men, she knew.

Presently, the drawing rooms emptied. Presently, moving like an automaton, smiling like a *mannequin*, every graceful pose a lie and every easy word a torment, she found herself, Gerald at her side, standing by a supper-table with the last residuum of her party—Cyril, Alan, her father, Mildred and Cynthia, an unknown couple, Angela. The unknown couple drifted away. Smithers produced whisky; and, taking family liberty, the men—all except Gerald—sat down to drink a nightcap.

"Devilish good show, Hermione," pronounced Alan, a cigar between his teeth. "Gratters. Aunt Lollipop went off in ecstasies."

"And a brand new Lanchester," laughed Angela, a diamond bobbing on its platinum chain against her Russian head-dress as she settled herself beside Doxford.

Mildred and Cynthia, who disapproved of their distant cousin, signified their intention of departing, and carried it out. Angela, ignoring the faint snub, turned a soft face up to her host's, saying: "If you were a really loving husband, Gerry, you'd make Hermione sit down,and get her a drink. Poor dear! She looks quite worn out."

Gerald fetched a chair, whisky; and Hermione, her limbs cold under her frock, accepted both. "Why don't they go?" she thought. "Why don't they go?" It seemed as though her ordeal would never end; as though she would never get away from these people, never escape to the solitude of her own bedroom.

Alan went. But her father and Cyril, in talkative mood, lingered on; and Angela lingered with them.

"I've lost my cavalier," explained Angela, "so you'll have to see me home, Cyril. By the way," her blue eyes sought Hermione's, "I wonder what happened to Gordon. He was in rather a temper when I brought him. Something to do with his kit, I believe. I hope he made his salaams properly."

"Gordon went off about an hour ago," said Hermione, covering her confusion with a laugh. "I saw him off the premises myself."

The jest, however, did not deceive Angela Hemmingway. She had been a little puzzled at Gordon's disappearance; but the cousinly confusion—to her inquiring mind—seemed to explain much of the puzzle. Obviously—since Hermione was confused at the mention of him—Gordon must have given her some hint, more than a hint, perhaps, of his passion. Probably, there had been a scene. If so, had Hermione resented, or responded? Supposing she had responded? There was pleasure in the thought.

At last, the Earl rose, and Doxford with him. At last, perforce, Angela imitated their example; and a moment later, as the front door closed, husband and wife found themselves alone.

"I think I'll go to bed," said Hermione quietly. "Are you pleased," she forced her lips to the smile, "with your—our party?"

"More than pleased. And you?"

"Too tired for speech. Good-night, Gerry."

"Good-night, Hermione."

They did not kiss—for the servants were still in the hall. Nevertheless, as his wife went slowly up the staircase, Gerald Cranston's thoughts followed her.

The party, except for his mother's presence (it amused him, remembering their struggling days, to remember that homely little figure holding its own among the most difficult society in England) had not stirred his pulses. The party had been more or less business—one more rung up that endless ladder of his ambition for power. Now that it was over, and successfully over, his servants could clear up the débris of it—the flower-petals and the tobacco-ash and the sequins which littered his floors. And yet, some emotion—Gerald Cranston knew—had stirred, was still stirring his pulses.

All evening, defying discipline, that emotion had been at work in him. All evening, he had been conscious of an unwonted disquietude, of a longing which was almost pain. "She owes you a debt," ran the thoughts which followed Hermione. "A debt."

Deliberately, disciplining thought, he followed her up the staircase; made the door of his own apartments; let himself in; flooded the two rooms with light. Deliberately, he began to undress. But though he had disciplined thought, disciplined emotion, disquietude remained. Everything about him—the meticulously tidied room, the pyjamas on the turned-back bed, the silk dressing-gown, the bath-slippers—spoke of order, of little things mastered to his will. And yet, life's self—said disquietude—was still to master.

Undressing, he passed from bedroom to bathroom; washed; cleaned his teeth; brushed his hair; came back. The gold watch on the table by his bedside pointed two o'clock. Slowly, he doffed his dressing-gown; kicked the slippers from his feet; climbed into bed; switched off the last light; laid his head on the pillow.

Usually, he slept at will. But to-night there was no sleep in him. His keen ears magnified every sound—the hoot of near

traffic, the drone of distant, the tick of his watch. From beyond the door which separated his room from hers, came another sound—the sound of Hermione's voice dismissing Syrett.

He turned on his pillow; shut the lids hard on his eyes; and tried, lying there in the darkness, to control disquietude. But disquietude would not be controlled. It waxed in the darkness: shewing him his life-pattern incomplete. Longing came to him; and with longing, pain. It was as though he heard a voice—Arthur's voice—calling to him out of the darkness, "Steppy. Steppy."

Once more he tried to sleep. But the voice still called to him. Only now it seemed to him that it was not Arthur's voice, but the voice of his own unborn man-child.

"Steppy!" Step-father! Must he then remain merely step-father, harbourer of another man's child, he who could hear the birth-cry of his own?

The imaginary voice ceased. One by one, all other sounds died away. The house grew utterly quiet. His eyes opened on silence. Darkness filled the room. Yet through the darkness, stabbing him to pain, glimmered one tiny sword-point of light. So Hermione was also sleepless!

Now the pain grew terrible, not to be borne. Now, making never a sound, Gerald Cranston raised himself from bed; felt for his dressing-gown, his slippers; donned them; and stole across the thick carpet towards that sword-point of light which stabbed at him through the curtain over his wife's door. Now, deliberately, he knocked.

Followed silence. Then a faint startled rustle. He knocked again. He called to her: "Hermione—Hermione!"

After a pause, her voice answered: "What is it? What's the matter? Are you ill, Gerald?"

He made no reply; only, opening the door, went in to her.

At his knock, she had started up from her pillows. As he made his way across the room towards the low Empire bedstead, the warm glow of the orange-shaded lamp by which she had been reading shewed him her unbound hair, the glimmering violets of her eyes, the glimmering lustre of her bared throat.

"Gerald," she asked again, "what is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter." He smiled down at her from his great height. "Except that I can't sleep. Hermione——"

Through the film of her night-dress, his hand rested on her shoulder. The touch of his fingers paralysed; she could make

no movement to elude them. "It's his right," thought her frozen brain, "his right——"

He bent down to her; put his arms about her. Still, she could not resist. Silently, his lips sought hers. . . And then, suddenly, she saw his eyes. His eyes were not as Tony's, not as Gordon's. Yet she could see fire in their blue pupils, a fire as of molten silver.

Involuntarily, her lips refused his kiss. Involuntarily, her body stiffened in his arms. Her limbs grew rigid—rigid with horror between the warm sheets.

"Not to-night, Gerald," said her refusing lips. "Not to-night. Please."

The fire still burned—silver in his blue pupils. But his great arms relaxed, loosed their hold. "As you wish," he said coldly; and turning, went from her.

Watching him across the room, she too grew conscious of pain, of pain self-inflicted.

CHAPTER TEN

§ 1

In the lives of individuals, as in the lives of nations, certain days are definitive—markers of progress or retrogress, of failure or accomplishment, of victory or defeat. So, with the Cranstons, the day following their first reception in Aldford Street—June the fifth, says accuracy—marked a distinct stage, a distinct change, in their relationship.

In Hermione, less disciplined of thought though more given to introspection, the change defied self-analysis. Her momentary revulsion seemed—once morning had dispelled the hallucinations of the night—a trifle ridiculous. If anything, she felt that she had been mean—ungracious and ungrateful. Gerald might not love, but at least he respected her. Could she ask more of him? Did she *need* more? Surely not. Yet—if she needed no more of him than respect—why should memory still prick her with that sudden consciousness of pain? "Was it because I had to hurt him?" she asked herself. But memory, remorseless, told her that the pain had been in her own body, self-inflicted.

Then, while she was still cross-questioning herself, came a letter from Gordon which only increased her bewilderment. Gordon, melodramatic as ever, wrote from shipboard that he was "repentant," "ashamed of himself," "miserable." He had "lost his head," "behaved like a cad," "craved forgiveness." All the same—and hence bewilderment—he begged her to "find excuses for him." He loved her—as no man had ever loved her, could ever love her. Love wasn't sanity. It was madness. One day, perhaps, she would realize that. Meanwhile, "on his knees," he implored her to overlook his "folly," to remember their old friendship, to write to him. "A post-card. Just your name. It would mean nothing to you. To me, life or death!"

"So he says!" retorted Hermione, humour coming to her aid.

And those days, she needed all her humour: for the big fight—that tremendous issue between false pride and true humility

which, if pride wins it, wrecks the lives of individuals as it wrecks the lives of nations—was secretly beginning in her. Whereas, in Cranston, it had not yet begun.

In him, her refusal had stirred—as he thought—only anger. Since she had not been asleep, why the protest? After all, she was his wife—his unfruitful wife. She owed him a debt.

Morning dispelled his momentary anger, as it dispelled her momentary revulsion. Work and self-discipline took the edge off that acute longing which had—alone as he imagined—driven him to her room. Yet neither work nor self-discipline could quite conquer the disquieting thought of his continued childlessness.

That thought used to come on him privily, without warning, as an enemy half-beaten still wages guerilla warfare. For hours at a time, he would be his old resolute self, masterful, almost arrogantly confident. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the enemy would be upon him, crying: "You have no child. Why have you no child? Of what avail is your work unless flesh of your flesh inherit the fruit of it?"

In the City, he could beat off the enemy easily enough. But in Aldford Street—and more especially in the night-nursery at Aldford Street—the fight was always a fierce one. Hermione's child so obviously trusted him, believed in him. No rasp of the voice, no jocular threat of punishment could shake that trust. It was a thing immutable—like the devotion of a dog to his master. Once even, in a burst of enthusiasm for a tiny model of a field-gun which had taken Cranston's eye on one of his rare walks, Arthur, clambering upright in his cot, vouchsafed, "I wish you weren't only Steppy. I wish you were really my dad."

The words were like a hot iron on Cranston's flesh. He had to turn away from the cot, to dominate his voice before he could reply: "Don't talk rot, youngster. Or I shan't buy you any more guns."

"Oh yes, you will, Steppy," retorted the child.

After that, the enemy grew bolder. Neither the day's work, nor the night's over-work into which Cranston flung himself as a scalded boy will fling himself into cold water, were free from his attacks. Guerilla warfare became pursuit. From the sanctum in Park Lane to the sanctum in Old Broad Street, up and down and about London, the foe of self-reproach rode loud behind him. "Cosgrave's child," shouted the foe. "Where is your own?"

He would have gone back to Hermione sooner, had it not been for that other foe, for the ancient enemy, still unrealized,

still unguarded against, whose name—if name it had—was " Fear of Woman." Between him and her had been no rupture, not even the hint of a rupture. No key had ever turned in the lock which separated their rooms. He could ask the opening of that door at his pleasure.

But for a month, he neither asked nor opened. And all that month the old foe drew him pictures—pictures of the physical Hermione his eyes had seen on the night she had refused him, of her unbound hair and the glimmering violets of her eyes and the glimmering lustre of her bared throat. He could not quite say to those pictures, as he had said to the pictures of other women : " You suit me. But that's all " ; nor quite, as on his wedding-morning : " Praise the Lord, there's no question of love between us." He could only . . . not enter Hermione's room.

It was so easy not to enter Hermione's room. Work ; the social round (the Season was at its height of dinner-partying, theatre-partying, supper-partying) ; the mere material fact that they did not live as ordinary folk in the close proximity of a little home, but in the semi-state of a plutocratic establishment ; her maid ; his valet ; their common dignity ; her pride ; his fear—all these combined to keep them temporarily separate. And even when temporary separation ended, their reunion held no love, nothing of mutuality.

In that resumption of connubial routine flamed no vital fire, not even the poorest spark of passion. Physically one, psychically they remained two. Ships without wireless, inarticulate—she with her subconscious craving to be loved, and he with his subconscious fear of loving overmuch—they drifted asunder across the dangerous seas of marriage ; till, hull-down below the horizons of misunderstanding, neither spirit could communicate its dumb distress.

Had they been friends, had they even been enemies, they might have re-established communication. But they were neither friends nor enemies—merely strangers. Male and female, they lived under a common roof-tree—but with scarcely a thought in common. Each had made its bargain ; and to the letter of that bargain, each adhered.

Yet already the secret woman in Hermione Cranston knew the bargain irksome, bond of the flesh without bond of the spirit, a contract whose every fulfilment stirred her subtly to displeasure.

§ 2

But Gerald Cranston knew nothing. For the nonce, his material existence—eventful and adventurous, every day, every hour bringing its fresh difficulty, its fresh triumph—obscured the spiritual. All that was best in him slumbered deeper than dreams; while all that was worst in him bade him dream himself master of money, master of power.

He was dreaming of power now, at he sat alone in his sanctum at Pinner's Court—a late sun slanting low through the three narrow windows on to the red-and-blue Axminster carpet—his clerks all gone—only the ceaseless tick-tap of Tillotson's typewriter in the outer office for accompaniment to his thoughts.

Spread out on his desk lay a letter whose envelope, marked "Private and Confidential", Tillotson had refrained from opening. He re-read it for the third time; laughed; memorized a telephone number; folded the double sheet, and put it away in his pocket-book.

The business day had been onerous, dangerous. Sandeman, the sales-manager selected for his coal-scheme, refused to leave his present employment unless guaranteed three thousand-a-year. Meyer and Masterson, the property-agents, reported trouble over the main wharf-lease. Harold had written disquietingly of a visit to the colliery: "It isn't the men; it's the Federation. We may have trouble in the autumn." Some fool of a Treasury solicitor had subpœnaed him to appear as a witness at the trial of Edward Sedgcumbe.

Troubles! But the letter in his pocket compensated for them. Vaguely, the imaginative faculty in him at work, he began to wonder who could have inspired that cautious approach. Rorkton? Doxford? Hardly. Neither the Earl's scruples nor his son's would permit . . . Never mind scruples! Scruples weren't his business. *He* hadn't made the rules of this particular game. His job was only to play in accordance with them.

The tick-tap of the typewriter in the outer office ceased; and a moment later Tillotson limped in with his sheaf of correspondence.

Signing the typewritten letters, Cranston's mind remained with the holograph one in his pocket. This fellow Walsh, who had asked him to telephone an appointment, might be only an under-strapper. He seemed, though, to have a good enough Club. Understrappers didn't belong to the Lustrum. . .

He finished signing his correspondence; told Tillotson to

switch the telephone through to the sanctum ; wished him good-night ; heard him limp for the lift ; hesitated a moment ; lifted the receiver, and asked for the memorized number.

" Is that the Lustrum ? " he asked. " Is Mr. Walsh, Mr. Robert Walsh, in the Club ? "

A porterly voice answered, after ascertaining the caller's name : " Yes, sir, Mr. Walsh is in the Club. I'll ask him to come to the instrument."

Cranston, the receiver at his ear, waited with his usual calmness—after all, the thing might only be a " try-on", a " feeler " —till a second voice, educated and unemotional, called over the wire : " Hullo. Am I talking to Mr. Cranston personally ? "

" You are."

" This is Mr. Walsh speaking, Mr. Robert Walsh. You got my letter, I gather ? "

" I did."

" You understand, of course, that what I wrote was strictly confidential ? "

" Naturally."

A pause. Then the voice at the other end of the line asked, " And when would it be convenient for you to receive me ? "

" I shall be busy all day to-morrow." Cranston scrutinized the memo-block at his elbow. " Thursday, too, I'm afraid. How would Friday suit you ? "

" I'm afraid I shall be out of town on Friday. And the matter's rather urgent. That's why I'm just wondering whether it would be possible for me to see you to-night. I shall be dining here, and could easily come on to Aldford Street afterwards."

Hesitant, Cranston again consulted the memo-block.

" I shouldn't keep you more than an hour at the outside," continued the voice.

" Very well. I'll see you at half-past nine."

" That will suit me excellently, Mr. Cranston."

Mr. Robert Walsh clicked off. Cranston hung up his receiver. Outwardly, he remained calm—no trace of emotion shewing in his blue eyes. Yet inwardly—as he took his hat and coat from their peg, his key-chain from his trouser-pocket ; as, locking his sanctum door and the door of the outer office behind him, he rang for the lift, descended and entered his car—excitement dominated him.

There was still work to do—a site to be inspected, Meyer and Masterson to visit. He inspected the site, saw Mr. Meyer ; but for once in a way his faculty for quick decisions failed, and

he deferred the deal—driving on from the property-agents' office to the new Club for which Rorkton had proposed and Doxford seconded him, there to drink an unusual cocktail before returning home.

In Aldford Street, "her ladyship," reported Rennie, was "not yet returned." Little Arthur, visited in his night-nursery, proved half-asleep. Cranston, therefore, retiring to his own apartments, undressed; dumb-belled; heard Hermione return; tubbed; shaved; donned his smoking-jacket, to the pocket of which he had already transferred Walsh's letter; and went downstairs.

In the hall, stood Smithers. Her ladyship, said Smithers, had ordered dinner for the quarter-to. Her ladyship was expecting company—Mrs. Hemmingway and Mr. Alan Rawley. He told Smithers, "I'm expecting a gentleman, Mr. Robert Walsh, at about half-past nine. When he comes, shew him into my study."

"Very good, sir," answered Smithers.

Seven forty-five brought Angela and Alan into the morning room; seven forty-six Hermione. Angela, greeting her cousin, said: "I hope you've broken to Gerry that we're all going on to the Palace."

"I'm afraid," Cranston smiled one of his rare smiles, "that you'll have to let me off the theatre. I've got work to do."

"Work!" smiled back Angela Hemmingway, already intimate of the household. "But, my dear Gerry, you can't work all day and all night, too."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll kill yourself if you do."

"Work never killed anybody," retorted Cranston.

All the same, her obvious disappointment pleased him; and, almost for the first time, he took physical notice of her. Undoubtedly, Angela was an attractive creature. An understanding creature, too! Lacking his wife's distinction, of course—and altogether too much the butterfly. Still—a charming woman, a woman who would be an ornament to any theatre-box. "I'll come on to the Palace if I can get through with my job," he promised her, half-way through dinner.

Dinner once over, however, and the three departed for their theatre, all thought of Angela Hemmingway passed automatically from Gerald Cranston's mind. Again reminding Smithers about his guest, he retired to his sanctum; lit a small cigar; drew the letter from his pocket, and sat down at the desk to re-peruse its cautious wording. "Devilish dangerous way to

write if it is only a feeler," he thought. "That's their trouble, though. Not mine!"

Then, putting away his cigar, he rose from the desk; switched off the centre-light; arranged one of the Chippendale chairs so that the beam of the green-shaded reading-lamp should fall full on the face of anyone who occupied it; and re-seated himself to wait for his visitor. Waiting—till the hands of the lantern-clock on the marble mantelpiece pointed five minutes past the half-hour—excitement once more dominated him. He remembered his early days in the corn-chandler's office. It seemed a far hunt from Cornmarket Street, Leicester, to Park Lane and . . .

"Mr. Robert Walsh, sir," announced Smithers.

Excitement passed. Shaking hands, bidding him be seated, Gerald Cranston's eyes looked dispassionate judgment over the man whom his butler had just shewn in. Except for a queer twist at the corner of his anæmic clean-shaven mouth, that look discovered nothing furtive, nothing unusual in the appearance of Mr. Robert Walsh. He had the pale complexion of the confirmed Londoner. His eyes, dark but unintelligent, were set close together in deep orbital cavities under brows of badly pencilled brown. His hair, a trifle untidy, matched his eyebrows. An effeminate chin, an undistinguished nose, and ears that protruded inoffensively from a well-domed skull, completed the picture Cranston had of him: while judgment added that he must be under rather than over medium height; that he wore his evening-clothes with the carelessness which betokens custom; and that, coupled with his handwriting, the tone of his opening, "This is, I fear, a most unusual hour for an appointment,' betrayed him a member of the legal profession.

"Not at all. Have a cigar, won't you? Or some whisky?" Cranston, from his chair in the shadow, pointed a capable hand at the cut-glass decanter and the large silver cigar-box on his desk.

"Thanks, no. But I'll have a cigarette, if I may."

"Try one of these."

They talked tobacco for three finessing minutes; till the solicitor (Cranston's judgment had been accurate enough) attacked his business with a diffident: "And now, Mr. Cranston, if you can spare me a little of your valuable time, I'd like to go somewhat more fully into the confidential matter which I took the liberty of broaching by letter."

"Go ahead, by all means."

Cranston's tone was a trifle curt; and Mr Walsh inhaled a

doubtful smoke-puff before starting in: "I need hardly repeat, I hope, that the—er—suggestion I am about to make is strictly confidential."

"Nothing you say in this room, Mr. Walsh," the tone grew reassuring, "will be repeated to a third party."

"Nor to the—er—Press?"

"Nor to the Press."

"Thank you for that assurance." Mr. Walsh's mouth relaxed to a twisted smile. "Then I won't beat about the bush. My letter—I trust—was, on one point at least, fairly explicit. Let me recapitulate that point. We have been informed—that is to say, the Party has been informed"—he named the Party—"that though your interests, at the moment, are commercial rather than political, you are in a position, should you care to do so, to contribute more or less largely to our—er—war-chest. Now it may or may not be news to you, Mr. Cranston, that people who contribute, either in a small way or a large, to Party funds, very rarely do so entirely of their own accord. On the contrary. Such people have to be approached. Moreover," another smile, "when the approach is successful, most contributors expect—and rightly, as I see it—some *quid pro quo*, some return—you will, I am sure, excuse my frankness—for their money."

"Quite so."

"Very well, then." The face in the beam of the reading-lamp still smiled twistedly. "If you have followed me so far, you will admit it natural that the *quid pro quo* should vary—not exactly in accordance with the amount of the contribution, but with the circumstances of the individual contributor. Certain people, yourself for instance," Mr. Robert Walsh shifted uncomfortably in his chair, "do not need *social* advantages. They do not—er—stipulate for introductions to Ministers, for seats at public banquets, or other, if I may be allowed to use the expression, minor perquisites. On the contrary, they—that is, people in your position, Mr. Cranston—demand more tangible advantages."

Obviously, the opening speech had been prepared; but as it went on; as Mr. Walsh, having recapitulated one by one the various "perquisites" expected by contributors to his "war-chest," approached the core of his affair, his words became less formal. "The Press are always trying to make stunts about the Party Fund business," he explained blandly. "But for the life of me, I can't see why. After all, a Party *is* a business. And like any other business, it needs capital. And capital——"

"Demands a dividend on its shares," interrupted Cranston.

"Indubitably." Mr. Walsh returned the frankness. "Now let me tell you something else. People often ask why a Party needs money—except at election times. Well, as to that, I can assure you that our expenses are enormous. Take the inquiry department alone. You'd be surprised how careful we've got to be. Only the other day——"

Mr. Walsh, despite his promise not to beat about the bush, talked on without coming to his climax. Listening to him, Gerald Cranston felt grimly amused. "Wonder how much he's going to ask me for?" speculated Gerald Cranston. "Wonder what he's going to offer me?"

The offer, however, tarried: for Mr. Robert Walsh realized, though the arrangement of the light was rather baffling, that though the man with whom he had to deal might have his price, the price would not be a low one. "I'm not taking up too much of your time, I hope?" he finessed.

"Far from it." Cranston's laugh expressed his grim amusement to a nicety. "You're interesting me enormously. I had no idea that a Party needed so much organization."

"Ours does." The solicitor continued his indirect methods. "Take our anti-Bolshevik campaign. You know, of course—I don't wish to bother you with politics, but this is rather outside politics, a national issue—that to-day our Party is the country's main bulwark against Bolshevism. Yet another reason—not that I wish to press you—why we deserve your support."

"I'm afraid I'm no believer in the Bolshevik bogey." Cranston laughed again. "As a nation, we've many faults—but going off our heads isn't one of them."

"You may be right." Mr. Walsh nodded gravely. "I trust you are. But even admitting that Bolshevism, in the Russian sense, is not to be feared—Socialism, and more especially intellectual Socialism, Bolshevism's pale pink sister, is an indubitable and a very serious danger. Consider your own main interest, for instance. I refer to coal. If the M.F.A.—our strongest Trade Union—orders out its men, as it may do at any moment, what will be the cause? Socialism!" The solicitor waved a lean hand. "Socialism, pure and simple."

"Mr. Walsh"—Cranston, his eyes on the clock, which shewed that his visitor had already been with him more than half-an-hour, passed from amusement to irritation—"as an employer of labour, I support Trade Unionism. The British working-man needs discipline. And there's no better method of disciplining him, under peace-conditions, than the Trade

Union one. You must remember that the M.F.A. is as much a capitalist organization as, say, your own party. Its leaders are capitalists too—I happen to know a few of them. They may be out to get more money for their men—after all, that's their job. But they're not out to lose their own. . . However, that's beside the point. You came, I believe, to make me an offer if I'd contribute to the funds of your Party. Well "—Cranston hesitated a purposeful second—" let's hear your offer, Mr. Walsh."

" Offer ! " Mr. Walsh, too, hesitated. " It's hardly an offer, Mr. Cranston. It's merely a suggestion."

" And the suggestion is ? "

More hesitation : then, definitively, the solicitor came to his point. " Briefly this—that if you, on your part, can see your way to a contribution of twenty thousand pounds to our war-chest, I, on mine, am empowered to inform you that your name will be put forward for a baronetcy in the forthcoming Honours List."

" And by whom, may I ask "—Cranston's voice was curter than ever, betraying never a hint of the excitement behind it—" are you empowered to make this . . . suggestion ? "

" That "—once more the go-between smiled his twisted smile—" I would rather not say."

Ensued silence : broken abruptly by the buzzer of the house-telephone.

" Excuse me." Cranston, not unpleased at the interruption, for his brain, functioning at highest pressure, needed time to plan the next move, drew the instrument towards him ; and heard Rennie's apologetic, " Would he speak with Mr. Rawley ? "

" Yes—put him through."

Promptly, the main-line bell rang ; and Cranston, lifting another receiver, heard Alan's voice. The show had been dull. They had come away before the end ; were at Angela's. Would he join them there ?

" I'll be with you in half-an-hour," he said ; then, hanging up the receiver, turned again to his guest.

" I'm afraid," he began, " that your . . . suggestion is hardly explicit enough. As I understand it, you get twenty thousand pounds ; and I," the smile stung, " a politician's promise."

" It's the usual procedure, Mr. Cranston."

" Possibly, Mr. Walsh. But it's not business. When a man parts with cash, he wants more than promises."

" I'm afraid I am not empowered—— " Mr. Walsh half

rose from the Chippendale chair; thought better of his intention; sat down again, and went on: "But presuming—mind you, it is only a presumption—that I were empowered to go further, would you be prepared to give the Party half the credit of its good intentions?"

"Do you mean," Cranston discarded finesse, "would I be prepared to pay you ten thousand pounds down, and a further ten thousand on the day you"—this time, the smile was almost a grin—"deliver the goods? If so—I'll be frank with you, Mr. Walsh—I'm prepared to consider the matter."

"And how soon," the go-between's face betrayed its pleasure, "could we expect your decision?"

"Are you in a hurry for it?"

"Not exactly in a hurry, Mr. Cranston." The face in the lamp-light composed itself. "But if you could come to a decision within the next few days, it might make matters easier. Governments, unfortunately, are not permanent institutions. Even this one might fall; and under a different administration——"

Whereupon, Mr. Robert Walsh, leaving the unfinished sentence to work for him in his absence, rose to his feet; held out his lean fingers; terminated the interview with a courteous: "I'm sure I've detained you far too long, Mr. Cranston. By all means, take your time to consider the matter; and when you have considered it, let me know. A line to the Lustrum will always be forwarded"; and, his host ringing the desk-bell to summon a servant, took his departure.

§ 3

Gerald Cranston's mind—his guest away—still seethed with repressed excitement. Striding in his usual deliberate way along Park Lane, he knew himself in no state for consecutive thought. Emotionally he remembered how, looking down from his balcony at the Ritz on the day of his wedding, he had vowed to conquer London. Well, he *was* conquering it. He had been offered a baronetcy. A baronetcy!

A crowded omnibus thundered by; and, carelessly, eyeing its packed passengers, he remembered other days, the days when he, too, had travelled with the crowd; the clanging trams of Leicester; the third-class carriages to Coalville. Those days were over, done with. Effort, his own unaided effort, had raised him above the crowd. Now, if he travelled, he travelled first-class; or, better still, in his own car. The travel metaphor

pleased him ; and he elaborated it. He, Gerald Cranston, was always travelling—travelling more and more rapidly towards that goal of his ultimate success, Power. "I've gone far," he thought. "I'll go further yet." Vaguely, a new disquietude cried out on him, "You travel fast, Gerald Cranston ; but you travel lonely." Sharply, he laughed disquietude away. Lonely, indeed ! As though he, of all men, could be lonely. "I've a wife," he told that new disquietude, "a mother, a brother, friends. Next year, I'll be a Baronet."

Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet ! The words crashed triumphant in his brain. Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet ! Another rung, two rungs, up the ladder of success. Again, he remembered his wedding-day. He had promised himself a title, then. Now, the promise approached fulfilment. He would buy this title—have done with it. So long as Walsh stuck to his bargain —and, after all, once the first ten thousand had been paid, even a politician would find it difficult to back out of the deal—the investment could not fail to pay dividends. A handle to a man's name was as good as money in his pocket. Take Marankari alone. If ever that syndicate blossomed into a company, what confidence those words "Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet" would inspire in prospective shareholders.

So Gerald Cranston's impulses ! And yet, in impulses' despite, he realized himself not altogether decided. Somehow, as he had always known it would, the thing went against his grain. It wasn't—no good shirking the issue !—a straight deal.

Walsh's trouble, that—and the Party's ! After all, since Honours were sold—why shouldn't he buy one ? After all, life being a fight, it behoved a man to employ his weapons to the full. "And my weapon, my money, is clean," thought the striding Cranston. "I made it honestly. I can use it in any way I like." After all, one couldn't carry scruples to excess. Lots of things in life went against the grain. Moreover, he hadn't approached Walsh.

For the moment, the speciousness of that last argument blew scruples to the winds. Passing Chesterfield House, triumph overwhelmed him. "Sir Gerald Cranston, First Baronet of Studley." Why not ? Why in the world not ?

He stopped to light a cigarette ; saw his hands steady as rocks. "A baronetcy," he thought. "Not a twopenny-ha'penny knighthood, but a permanent title—a title that passes to one's son."

But at that, starkly, the old longing, the pain he had thought defeated, re-surged in him. The cigarette-smoke stank bitter

in his nostrils. Angrily, he flung the thing away; stamped it under his feet. What if, buying this title, he continued childless?

He controlled his anger; controlled the pain which had inspired it; strode on. By now, he was half-way down deserted Curzon Street. At the far end of the street, a car moved slowly past the Christian Science church. Vaguely, he wondered whether it might be his own. It looked like a Rolls. The car, however, disappeared up Clarges Street before he could make certain of its identity; and, a minute or two later, turning right-handed past a huge shuttered mansion, he found himself in front of Angela Hemmingway's orange-varnished front-door.

Lights burned behind the sitting-room curtains; but the basement was in darkness. "Servants gone to bed," thought Cranston. He hesitated a moment; then, fearful of disturbing the household, tapped the sitting-room window with his stick. Almost immediately, a hand parted the curtains to reveal Angela's face. Hand and face signalled, "All right. I'll come to the door."

"Hermione and Alan have just gone," explained Angela, opening to him. "They waited three-quarters-of-an-hour."

"Confound it!" Cranston's expletive betrayed no heat. "So that *was* the Rolls I saw."

"You're not very polite, Gerry." She smiled at him under the hall lamp. "And I was just going to invite you in."

Laughing, he followed her into the exiguous hall.

Angela insisted on relieving him of his hat, of his gloves and stick. The incident was sheerest luck—she had neither instigated Alan to telephone Gerry, nor instigated Hermione to leave so early. And the luck thrilled her. To have him here, alone, even if it were only for five minutes, seemed like an omen. How huge he appeared in her little bandbox of a home!

Eagerly, yet masking her eagerness, she led him into her sitting-room. The front windows were all closed: "For fear of burglars," she told him. But the back windows were wide to the summer night, and the heavy dragon-scrolled curtains had been drawn back to let in the grateful breeze. The double sitting-room might have been a garden bower. Roses bloomed in the silver bowl on the cleared dinner-table; delphiniums flaunted blue behind the grinning Buddha. Here lilies, there carnations mingled their fragrance with Angela's own bitter-sweet perfume.

"And that's the Eastern touch," she laughed, pointing to the marigolds on the red-lacquered Shinto shrine.

She offered him the big armchair, which he accepted; "a peg", which he refused.

"A cigarette, then?"

"No, thanks."

"You're an abstemious animal, aren't you, my friend?"

Angela curled herself on the divan. To-night, she wore a frock of plain black velvet, and no head-dress: so that the body of her seemed to disappear among the black cushions, leaving only a pale face and two paler arms and the close-fitting casque of her gold hair visible under the orange lantern-light. Chattering, she could see that her appearance gave him pleasure; but that the pleasure was impersonal—indifferent—negative. The difficulty of him thrilled her anew. One day, soon perhaps, his pleasure in her would be as her pleasure in him—personal, keen, positive. But that day was not yet. For the moment—every aptitude in her sounded sharp warning—she must content herself with what she had of him, play friend and not lover.

"You didn't miss much by not coming to the theatre," she said. "It was a rotten show. You'd have been bored to tears."

"Probably," he agreed.

"Whereas, you've been enjoying yourself."

"Enjoying myself?" His eyes flickered at her across the room. "What makes you think that?"

"I only guessed it."

"How?"

"From your looks. You look," she quizzed, "excited."

Her penetration startled him.

"I am a little excited," he admitted.

"Business?"

"In a way."

"That means politics."

Again, her penetration startled him. He had the impulse to ask her advice; stifled the impulse, fell silent. And Angela knew better than to press her quarry. "Secrets?" she cooed.

"Yes. Secrets."

His mouth closed on the word; and she adored him for his reticence. His taciturnity, his implacability, moved her as no love-making had ever moved. She wanted to throw herself at his feet, to lift his big hands to her lips, to murmur: "Gerry, I love you. Don't talk. Take me!" One night, he should take her—unasked—in those great arms of his Take her and hold her to him. One night! But that night was not yet. . .

"I ought to be off," he said, rising.

"So you ought." Aptitude told her not to detain him, not to protest. "It's nearly midnight."

She, too, rose, holding out her hand; and for a moment, as their fingers clasped, her face, delectable in the half-light of that delectable room, upturned to his. "It was nice of you to come in, Gerry," she went on; "I'm rather a lonely person these days."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

§ 1

GERALD CRANSTON'S interest in Angela Hemmingway—unlike Angela Hemmingway's interest in Gerald Cranston—was as yet so utterly untinged with emotion that, at the time they were spoken, her parting words hardly affected him. Next morning, however, waking to his punctual tea, his thoughts, for once in his life, refused immediate concentration. Instead of considering the prospect of the day, he fell to considering the retrospect of the night.

The retrospect, in more ways than one, failed to please. He had walked home from Angela's to find Hermione and the household already asleep. Memory recalled a vague irritation at the extinguished lights, at the silence which greeted him as he let himself in with his latch-key; recalled, too, that lonely half-hour during which, over a final cigarette, he had tried to thresh out the question of Mr. Walsh's offer.

The answer to that question—he remembered, springing from bed—had eluded, as it was still eluding him. There had been so many arguments for accepting the "suggested" honour; so few against acceptance. And yet the few against—the futile ethical hair-splittings which all culminated in the single sentence, "It isn't a straight deal"—had restrained him from decision.

"But even if it isn't entirely straight," he said to himself, as he picked up his dumb-bells, "it's done every day. It's a custom of the country. If you had a son of your own, you wouldn't hesitate a second."

Nevertheless, decision still tarried; and—retrospect continuing to the steady swing of his dumb-bells—Angela's chance words began to echo in his mind. "I'm rather a lonely person." Curious how she had voiced his own disquietudes, "You travel fast, Gerald Cranston, but you travel lonely."

Dumb-belling over, concentration came back to him; and coldly, he fell to considering the commercial aspect of Walsh's

offer. Commercially speaking, was Walsh's promise worth ten thousand? If Walsh kept his promise, could the other ten thousand be found? Obviously, it could. "What's twenty thousand to me?" he thought scornfully.

All the same, he could not quite make up his mind: so that neither that morning, nor the day that followed, nor the next day, saw decision clinched. Always, even at his most ruthless, he had prided himself on "going straight." And this thing wasn't straight; wasn't quite—old-fashioned phrase!—"according to Cocker."

§ 2

On the fourth day of Cranston's indecision, as though still further to complicate existence, the Sedgcumbe trial began with a flourish of Fleet Street trumpets.

The fact that he had been subpœnaed as a witness in that trial annoyed him. It would mean the waste of a valuable hour. The prosecution had plenty of evidence without dragging him in. Besides, the whole City knew that Sedgcumbe was a common swindler. "I've no pity for the chap," he thought, as he stepped into his Armstrong-Siddeley on the morning that was to see him give his evidence.

The car went smoothly on, through the July sunshine, down Oxford Street towards Holborn; and its owner, dismissing Sedgcumbe from his mind, utilized the moments to re-read the draft contract with his new manager. Sandeman was to have two thousand-a-year salary, all expenses, and a sliding scale commission (guaranteed at not less than a thousand-a-year) on all coal marketed in London. So far, so good. The period of his engagement—three years!—could also stand. But not that other clause—the clause which gave him "a free hand."

Cranston drew a pencil from his pocket, and began to modify Hardcastle's wording; was still modifying it when Havers circled out of Holborn and pulled up without a jar at the big stone doorway of the Old Bailey.

"Am I to wait, sir?" asked Havers through the open window of the landaulette.

"Of course you're to wait." Cranston, his mind still concentrated on the contract, spoke irritably. Then, putting it away in the tail-pocket of his morning-coat, he stepped out of the car, to find one of the Treasury solicitor's clerks—a meek little old man whose pate gleamed bald as an egg under his lifted silk hat—waiting for him on the pavement.

"Are you Mr. Gerald Cranston, sir?" asked the clerk.

"I am. You promised to call me as soon as the Court opened."

"Sir Richard's very sorry, sir." The clerk covered his bald head. "But he won't be able to call you before a quarter-to-eleven."

"Confound it. My time's valuable. I told your people so on the telephone last night. Can't I get down to my office and come back?"

"I'm afraid there'll be hardly time for that, sir. But I could easily find you a seat in Court. It's quite an interesting case——"

"Very well. I'll do that." Cranston, controlling his annoyance at the delay, followed the little man under the stone archway into the echoing hall, up the marble staircase and on to the big balustered landing, where be-wigged and be-gowned barristers, blue-uniformed constables, clerks, witnesses, wives, daughters, sisters and mistresses of men on trial already clustered round the oak doors of the various Court-rooms. The peculiar atmosphere of the place—though it was his first experience of it—did not affect him.

"What'll Sedgcumbe get?" he asked casually.

"Three years, I expect, sir, if they find him guilty."

"Is that all?"

"Three years is a long stretch—at Mr. Sedgcumbe's age sir."

The sympathy in his guide's answer astonished Cranston; something impelled him to say: "You talk as though you knew him."

"I used to, sir. As a matter of fact, we were at school together."

"Really."

"Yes, sir. And I've held shares in one or two of his companies. Mr. Sedgcumbe often treated his smaller shareholders very liberally, sir."

By now, they were facing a double glass-fronted oak door, through which—the clerk refraining from further confidences—they passed, at a sign to the constable on guard, into Number 1 Court-room.

The Sedgcumbe trial, long, complicated, involving a wearisome elucidation of figures, had already lost its attractions for the general public; and although the clock on the far wall pointed three minutes to ten, the big domed place was still half-empty.

"They'll be bringing the prisoners up directly, sir," said the clerk, leaving him.

Cranston—his mind already reverting to the problem of Sandeman—remained unaffected. Neither the opening of the proceedings—the appearance of Sedgcumbe's back and the backs of his associates in the dock, the entrance of the judge and his accompanying sheriffs; nor their continuance—the mounting of a witness to the witness-box and Sir Richard's rising to continue the over-night examination—interested him in the least.

"Wonder how soon I'll get away," he thought impatiently; and when, some forty-five minutes later, he rose up and walked deliberately round the dock past the reporters' table towards the witness-box, he did not even turn his head to look at the prisoners. His mind was on his evidence. He felt perfectly cool, perfectly calm, perfectly disinterested. Yet once in the witness-box, he was vaguely aware of drama, almost of tragedy. From the box, one could not avoid the face of the man in the centre of the five prisoners, of the man one had known in his prosperity. To-day, one could hardly associate prosperity with that man. He looked like his own ghost. His floridity had given place to pallor. His blue eyes seemed to have sunk deep into the fat of his cheeks. The ends of his heavy-cavalry moustache drooped like candles in hot weather. His podgy hands were tremulous on the edge of the dock.

Subconsciously, pity strove for birth in Gerald Cranston. "Poor devil!" he thought, as he kissed the Book and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God. Then, putting pity away from him, he began his evidence.

That evidence, as elicited by Sir Richard, was simple, damning enough. Yes, said Gerald Cranston, he had been one of the original shareholders in Coronation Cotton. Yes: the prisoner Sedgcumbe had asked him to buy the shares. Yes: the prisoner Sedgcumbe had informed him that the Coronation Cotton Mills were working to their full capacity of fifty thousand spindles. Yes: the prisoner Sedgcumbe had confirmed that information by letter.

"And how much money, on the strength of that letter, did you invest in Coronation Cotton shares?"

"Five thousand five hundred pounds."

"To whom did you pay the money for those shares?"

"To Edward Sedgcumbe."

Counsel for the Crown, who had only called Cranston in order to prove the authenticity of the letter discovered in Sedgcumbe's private copying-book, sat down—making way for Defending

Counsel, a man nearly as big as Cranston himself, whose gray eyes, as they lifted from his notes and glanced at their witness across the well of the Court, seemed peculiarly hostile.

"I gather from your evidence, Mr. Cranston," began the big man's cross-examination, "that you are a speculator. Is that so?"

"Certainly not."

"But you speculate occasionally?"

"Very occasionally."

"On those rare occasions when you do speculate, you sometimes win and sometimes lose?"

"Naturally." Cranston's sarcasm matched his opponent's.

"Now tell me—in what light did you regard these shares you bought from Mr. Sedgcumbe? As a speculation?"

"I regarded them as an investment."

"As a speculative investment?"

"If you care to put it that way."

"And how"—Counsel glanced at its notes—"did this particular speculative investment turn out? Did you make money on it?"

"I did."

"May I ask how much?"

But at that, Counsel for the Crown protested. "My Lord," protested Counsel for the Crown, "is the question relevant?"

"I think, Sir Richard"—his lordship, who had also been scribbling notes, lifted a be-spectacled forehead—"that I ought to allow it."

"Please tell the jury how much money you made on Coronation Cotton shares," said Counsel for the Defence; and Cranston, not altogether pleased at the line of the cross-examination, hesitated perceptibly before answering:—

"I bought four thousand Ordinary shares and fifteen hundred Preferred shares at par. I sold the Ordinary shares at two pounds and the Preferred at twenty-seven-and-six. That was the average price, less commission."

"Really!" Counsel for the Defence wrote down a figure or so on the back of his brief. "Then your total profit on the transaction was somewhere in the neighbourhood of five thousand pounds. Allow me to congratulate you on the result of your speculative investment."

A member of the jury tittered; and for the fraction of a second, Cranston's gall rose. For the fraction of a second, he had the impulse to tell Counsel for the Defence to mind his own business.

Before the impulse could materialize, however, the big barrister, pressing his momentary advantage, had gone on: "I believe that at the time of this transaction, you and my client were on friendly terms. Is that so?"

"We were business acquaintances."

"The letter he wrote you begins: 'My dear Cranston.' Is that form of address usual between business acquaintances?"

"I presume so—since your client used it."

This time the juryman's titter did not annoy the witness, who, as the cross-examination continued, began to be faintly amused. "This fellow's brain is no match for mine," he thought—fencing with Counsel's attempt to prove that Sedgcumbe's motive in writing the letter had been merely to "help a friend."

"I've already told you," he said calmly, "that your client was no friend of mine."

"Very well, Mr. Cranston." Counsel began a new line. "I'll accept what you tell me about your friendship with my client. It didn't exist. But you were not hostile to him?"

"Not in the least."

"And you have no hostility to him now?"

"Certainly not."

"You are here on subpœna?"

"I am."

The big barrister paused for a moment: then, quietly, he asked: "You have already told us that you disposed of your holding in Coronation Cotton at a profit. Now tell me: had you any particular reason for selling out when you did?"

At that, once more, Cranston hesitated, and, hesitating, caught Sedgcumbe's eyes fixed on him from the dock. The eyes were piteous. "Don't give me away," they seemed to be saying. "Don't give me away."

Then Counsel, noticing the hesitation, repeated the query; and hardening his heart, he said, "I sold out on the declaration of the dividend. My knowledge of the company told me it couldn't possibly have been earned."

§ 3

Leaving the witness-box after his short re-examination, Gerald Cranston experienced hardly a qualm. The Sedgcumbe incident, insofar as it concerned him, was closed. He had spoken the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Now, he could get back to the office and devote himself to his own business.

Nevertheless, passing out through the glass-fronted oak doors, across the big empty landing, down the marble staircase, and into his car, he experienced a moment's difficulty in banishing the mental picture of the face in the dock. Fleetingly, he remembered that Sedgcumbe was married, had children; fleetingly, he recalled the little clerk's sympathetic, "Three years is a long stretch—at Mr. Sedgcumbe's age." Stark foolishness, of course, to pity a swindler. And yet . . .

In the car, another picture, a picture out of his own past, assailed him. He saw himself, careworn after three battle-years, his D.S.O. ribbon on the breast of his tunic and his blue chevrons on his arm, presiding over a court-martial in the old battery Headquarters at "Plugstreet." The charge, "Cowardice in the Face of the Enemy", had been heard to its conclusion; the finding, "Guilty", unanimously decided. In front of the president's table, hatless, a bandoliered guard on his either side, stood the prisoner. The prisoner looked like his own ghost. His face was a gray pallor. His moustaches drooped. His eyes—blue eyes, bloodshot with fear—had sunk into his cheeks. . . Three weeks later, that prisoner had been blindfolded, tied to a post, shot.

At the time, Cranston remembered, he had approved the shooting. He approved it still. Discipline was discipline; life, life. Traitors, cowards, idlers, crooks must pay the penalty of their crimes.

And yet . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

§ 1

THE Lady Hermione Cranston, in conformity with many of her class, regarded the more popular organs of the daily Press as a species of light fiction destined for mass-consumption by the kind of people who extracted a vicarious emotion from the reports of the murder-trials, divorce-cases and other legal sensationalisms which her own newspaper almost invariably relegated to an obscure corner of that obscure page whereon one might, were one so minded, also peruse those other equally boring columns headed, " Shipping Reports ", " The Mails ", and " The Produce Market." Accordingly, it is doubtful whether she had even heard of the Sedgcumbe trial, until Syrett, who indulged in a special copy of the *Daily Pictorial*, called her attention, one morning as she lay late a-bed, with a discreet, " I thought this might interest your ladyship," to a snapshot of " Mr. Gerald Cranston, whose wedding to Lady Hermione Cosgrave took place last December, entering the Old Bailey to give his evidence for the prosecution ".

After that, naturally enough, she looked up the report of the trial. At first blush, her husband's evidence and the case against Sedgcumbe seemed commonplace enough. Gerald and the various other witnesses had been defrauded. It had been, therefore, their duty as citizens—an unpleasant duty, of course, since it involved publicity, but nevertheless a necessary one—to expose the defrauder, to help bring him to justice.

Gradually, however, re-reading that verbatim report, Hermione's intelligence realized that Gerald's evidence differed, in one vital particular, from the evidence of the other witnesses for the Crown. He, far from having been defrauded, had made a great deal of money—five thousand pounds at least—out of this man Sedgcumbe.

The realization was rather a shock. Handing the paper back to Syrett, she thought, " But he couldn't have done that. There must be some mistake. Gerald's the soul of honesty. He told

me as much, definitely, that evening at Studley. He may be ruthless—they're all ruthless in the City—but he wouldn't make money out of a swindle."

Nevertheless, all that day and all the evening which succeeded it, the gist of the words she had read troubled Hermione's memory. It seemed impossible, surveying Gerald as he sat implacably courteous at Aunt Mildred's dinner-table, that he should be anything but the honest man she had hitherto imagined him. And yet, unless the printed word had lied, how could he be honest ?

All the way home from South Kensington, impulse urged her to allay the vague trouble ; to ask him for the obvious explanation that he had been mis-reported. But his silence defeated her impulse ; and as day followed day (it was easy enough, on some pretext or other, to borrow Syrett's *Daily Pictorial*) without any contradiction of the quoted evidence, the trouble became a positive worry—a worry which no " Perhaps Gerald didn't see the thing ; perhaps he considers it beneath his dignity to contradict " could quite succeed in relieving.

For a week and a week, the Sedgcumbe trial dragged out its interminable complications ; and every hour, every minute of those fourteen days, the worry grew : till at last, on the Saturday morning when, from the window of her blocked car, she read on a newsvendor's placard at the corner of Conduit Street those two words, " Sedgcumbe—Result ", and knew, even before she ordered Lees to buy the paper, that Sedgcumbe had been found guilty, it became a poison—the poison of distrust.

Hitherto—or so it seemed as Lees tooled her towards Aldford Street—her main consolation in this second marriage had been a sure respect for Gerald's character. What, then—asked the distrust in her—if that respect were ill-founded ? What if this commoner whose name she bore, who, giving her his name, had acquired the right to her physical surrender, were a man of the same stamp as Sedgcumbe ? A swindler !

Waiting, according to their Saturday custom, for his punctual advent in the green-and-gold morning-room ; watching him when he entered ; accompanying him to their luncheon, the questions seemed ludicrous. Yet, remembering the reference to herself under the snapshot in the *Daily Pictorial*, both the pride and the distrust in her continued to ask them. " There must be some explanation," she thought. " There must be. And if there is, I've a right to it. After all, I'm not his chattel. I'm his wife."

But, all through their meal, she could reach no decision.

Supposing, in her ignorance of business, that she had misjudged the entire issue? Supposing that, resenting her questions, he were to put into words that bargain which had never yet been made formal between them: "You married me for my money. Be content with the things my money has given you"? Besides, wasn't it disloyal (and she hated disloyalty)—here, in the house he had given her; here, eating his salt, drinking his wine—even to suspect him of dishonesty?

And yet—driven by that love of her subconscious seeking which, though she might in no wise comprehend the workings of it, underlay, as the fire underlays the smoke of the volcano, all the worry and all the trouble of the past fortnight—Hermione did suspect, formlessly, if not quite reasonlessly, this new husband of hers. "He's too much the mystery," went on her thoughts. "Too little the man. I must find out about the mystery—make certain of the man. It's my duty—my duty to the family name, to Arthur. Arthur's a Cosgrave. I'm a Rawley. Gerald—Gerald's only Cranston."

The short meal, the casual conversation which had been accompaniment to her thoughts came to an end; Gerald lit his habitual cigar; Smithers, having ushered them back to the morning-room, supervised the footman's setting of the coffee-tray on its Chippendale stand between their two armchairs, and went out, closing the panelled door quietly behind him.

Pouring their coffee; lighting her own cigarette; watching the puffs of it blend with Gerald's contemplative smoke-rings, Hermione's purpose again wavered. She reminded herself that this quiet man had never been unkind to her; never failed—as she had once failed—in any least observance of their unspoken compact. On the contrary, *he* had gone beyond the compact; made her and her son safe against every material eventuality.

"Any plans for this afternoon?" she asked him.

"You haven't forgotten we're teaing at mother's? We might walk across the Park, don't you think?"

"Yes. I'd like that."

His words calmed, silenced her. Glancing undecided about the luxurious comfort of the room, she remembered the years before Gerald, her years of comparative poverty, and the nag of material circumstance from which he had given her surcease. Wouldn't it be better—far better—to let the sleeping dog of her distrust lie? Did it not suffice that there had been no comment, public or private, on the evidence Gerald had given?

"Temptation!" said the false pride, the distrust in her. "Temptation! Remember you're a Rawley; that you can't

afford—as *he* can afford—the slightest slur, the slightest suspicion of a slur." And the love of her subconscious seeking added: "Make sure—make sure of your respect for him. Nothing else—nothing else in the world really matters."

In the end, diffidently, she began: "Gerald, before we go out for our walk, there's something I'd like to ask you. May I?"

"If it isn't too difficult." The usualness of her tone deceived him.

"But it is rather difficult."

"Really."

"Well"—Hermione tried to hedge—"it's difficult for me."

"But not for me—eh?"

"Not so difficult."

"You sound rather serious. Go on! What's the trouble? Arthur?"

"No. It's got nothing to do with Arthur." His mention of her son, his brusqueness nearly turned her from her purpose. It seemed childish to suspect this dealer in direct yeas and nays of double dealing.

But already she had gone too far to draw back. "If the trouble isn't about Arthur," went on Gerald, "what *is* it about? The house—the servants—money?"

His last word hardened her resolution. Eyeing him, she thought: "Money. Always money. There speaks the real Gerald." Averting her eyes, she said: "In a way, it is about money."

"Hard-up—eh?" He laughed outright. "Bills? If so, give 'em to Tillotson. We've still got a pound or two at the Bank."

"You know I hate bills as much as you do." His suggestion angered her a little. "It isn't that sort of money-matter at all. It's something bigger—more important. Something—ethical."

"Good Lord!" He finished his coffee; laughed again; repeated his irritating slogan. "Well—go on!"

Hermione went on, hesitantly, his directness flustering her: "Gerald, do you remember telling me some time ago, at Studley, your views about—commercial morality, I think it's called?"

"Not precisely." Her hesitation missed him. "Remind me!"

"You said, among other things, that dishonesty was a poor substitute for brains."

"So it is."

"You haven't altered your views, then?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Cranston's lips still wore a

smile. "What's up?" he thought vaguely. "What's Hermione driving at?"

But Hermione's next words, equable though they were, shook his self-complacence. "I'm rather ignorant about business matters," she said, one hand swinging the tassel of her gown. "And I don't want to interfere in yours. All the same, there are certain things I'm entitled to know. You see, everything that concerns you, concerns—indirectly—me. That applies even to business."

"Quite so." Her lack of candour irritated him. "Since you share the spoils."

That hurt her; made her angry again. She fell silent—the tassel clenched in her hand. It seemed to him that she must be labouring under some delusion. "Hysteria?" he asked himself; and of her, not unkindly: "So you want to know something about my business. What?"

"Only one thing!" The kindness passed her by; diffidence went out of her voice, leaving it cold and a little haughty. "I only want to know one thing about your business, Gerald; and that is whether it's straight."

"Straight?" Cranston's tone hardened. It seemed to Hermione that she had flicked him on the raw. "Of course it's straight. I've told you so already."

"But aren't there"—some instinct urged her against judgment to continue the inquisition—"degrees of straightness?"

"No."

The curtness of that answer roused all the false pride in her. Suspicion told her that she was being treated like a child. "How can you say that?" she asked, her eyes clashing chill against his. "How can you expect me to believe that, in view of what you said in the witness-box?"

"What I said in the witness-box?" For a second, her meaning eluded the man. So many momentous business-things had happened since the giving of his evidence at the Old Bailey, that the incident had been almost erased from his memory. After a pause, he said, "You're not, by any chance, referring to the Sedgcumbe case, are you? Because if so——"

"I am referring to the Sedgcumbe case, Gerald." Hermione's hand unclenched from the tassel. At last, she had got to her point; got to grips with him. "I read all about it in the papers. It's been worrying me."

"Why?"

"*You* didn't see the papers, then?" Hope re-entered her mind.

"Naturally I read them."

"Which ones?"

"Oh," casually, "most of them. Why do you ask? When it comes to reporting law-cases, one paper's pretty much the same as the other."

His words took away her hope. "Then they *were* correct," she said slowly; "the reports, I mean. And it's true——"

"What's true?" Puzzled, he began to take her seriously.

"The evidence you gave."

"I'm not in the habit of bearing false witness against my neighbour, Hermione."

The grim force behind that "Hermione" baffled her, frightened her a little. Subconsciously, she had been expecting the mere mention of the case to provoke an explosion, not this—this sullen indifference which seemed to prove him a man without a conscience. Then, as he laid aside his cigar and the scrutiny of his eyes met hers across the coffee-tray, something impelled her to blurt out, "I'm not accusing you of that, Gerald."

"Then of what are you accusing me?" he retorted.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. You accused yourself when you admitted making five thousand pounds——"

"Out of Coronation Cotton? And why, pray, shouldn't I have made money out of Coronations?"

"Why?" His frown seemed to confirm her every suspicion. "I should have thought that Sedgcumbe's sentence was sufficient answer to that. You know, I presume, that the judge gave him seven years?"

"Yes." Cranston, reminding himself of her ignorance, controlled his vexation. "I know that. The sentence was rather stiffer than most of us expected. But what difference does it make?"

His inability to grasp her viewpoint only baffled, frightened Hermione still further. Nervously, she rose to her feet. Nervously, she said, "Gerald, you must see what a difference Sedgcumbe's condemnation makes. You must see that the mere fact of his having been found guilty proves you to have made five thousand pounds—a little fortune—out of a common swindler. And to make money out of a swindler——"

"But that's absurd." Still controlling himself, he was conscious of the need to wrestle with her scrupulosity. "I didn't make the money out of Sedgcumbe. I made it out of Coronation Cotton. Whether the jury found Sedgcumbe innocent or guilty doesn't affect the matter one iota."

"I'm sorry you can't see my point." For all her nervous-

ness, perhaps because of it, Hermione spoke bitterly. "To me, Sedgcumbe's condemnation seems to put you on his level."

At that, Cranston, too, rose up from his chair: so that they faced one another, silent strangers in the quiet of the morning-room. The ridiculousness of her views began to anger him. His impulse was to discipline her, to teach her once and for all that she must leave business to him.

"My dear woman," he said—and the words carried little endearment, "if you'll excuse me for saying so, you don't understand what you're talking about."

"It's you who don't understand." Suddenly, fear went out of her; and rage came in. "Either that—or else you're fencing with me. I may be a fool about business-matters; and about legal matters, too. But honesty's honesty. And it can't be honest to make a fortune out of a swindler."

Her insistence on the word "Swindler" added to his anger. He felt his self-control weakening. Never before had she crossed his will; never before had she—or any other—dared to question his code. "Five thousand pounds isn't a fortune," he said stubbornly.

"It's a lot of money."

"To some people. Not to me."

"Whether it was five thousand pounds or five pounds or five million pounds," his stubbornness, his egotism infuriated her, "the principle's the same."

"I grant you that." He was still speaking quietly—a man to a child. "But what you don't seem to realize is that, as I've already told you, I didn't make the money out of Sedgcumbe. I bought some shares in one of his companies; and sold them at a profit."

"You made a profit, then?"

"Naturally. Since I sold the shares."

"Out of a man who's gone to prison."

"How can you be so foolish? I didn't make a profit out of Sedgcumbe."

"Then out of whom did you make it?"

"How should I know? I sold through McManus, on the open market."

"But," his words were Greek to her, "the shares were worthless?"

"If they had been, I couldn't have sold them."

"Aren't they worthless now?"

"Possibly. How does that affect the issue?"

"To my limited intelligence, it affects it rather seriously."

At her sarcasm, anger very nearly had its way with Cranston. That a man's wife, of all people, should be the first person in the world to question his commercial honesty was bad enough, but that a wife so ignorant of business affairs as his own should do so was a positive outrage.

"We'd better have this matter out once and for all," he said. "Sit down, won't you?"

"Thanks. I'd rather stand." Emotion held her taut, and they still faced one another, upright, as he went on: "As you please. Your point, as far as I can see, is that I had no right to make five thousand pounds out of Coronation Cotton, because the man who floated Coronation Cotton happened to be a swindler. Is that correct?"

"Not entirely."

"Then let me put it another way. Is it your idea that I had no right to sell those shares because, when I sold them, I was almost certain that the declared dividend hadn't been earned?"

"You know I don't understand finance."

"Precisely. That's why I'm trying to make you understand it. Now listen—whoever bought those shares from me knew as much about the company as I did."

"How can you be certain of that?"

"If he didn't know, he could have found out. You're not suggesting, are you, that I should have kept the shares and lost five thousand pounds instead of making them?"

The question fazed her. She knew herself incapable of arguing with him; and the knowledge lashed her pride to breaking-point.

"Well——" he prompted; and, imagining her beaten, continued: "You see how absurd such a suggestion is, don't you? No man in his senses would hang on to shares—even if he were absolutely certain that they were valueless—until the bottom dropped out of the market."

But on that, Hermione's pride broke all bounds. "You treat me like a baby," she flashed at him, and rage reddened her cheeks. "Like a baby! And I won't stand it. I ask you for explanations; and all that you give me is a quibble. A quibble!" Her voice rose; her lips quivered. "Say what you like, but it isn't honest, it isn't straight, it isn't decent to make money out of criminals."

"Very well." Cranston's tone was ice. "Under the circumstances, we won't prolong our discussion. You say I treat you like a baby. I say"—deliberately he hesitated—"that you're behaving like one, that you're making yourself ridiculous."

"You wouldn't consider me ridiculous"—before she could check it, the sentence was out of Hermione's furious mouth—"if you'd been born a Rawley."

For the fraction of a second, the insult eluded Cranston. For the fraction of a second, he felt sorry that it should have been necessary to chide her. Then, as the slur on his birth stabbed home, his pride, too, broke bounds.

"Are you under the impression," he asked, the skin puckering round his eye-sockets, his blue pupils needle-points of frosty fire, "that your family's views on a point of honour are more likely to be accurate than mine?"

"Gerald!" Hermione's cheeks blanched. "Gerald——"

"Answer my question, please." Cranston's words rasped against the iron of his self-control. Remembering that unpardonable insult, he reminded himself that this woman who had uttered it was his wife—the one creature who most owed him obedience—the woman to whom he, childless, had been kind and over-kind; on whom he, childless, had settled money for another man's child!

"Answer me," he repeated. "Are you under the impression that because my name doesn't happen to be in the peerage, I don't know the difference between what's right and what's wrong?"

"I never said that, Gerald." In a flash she was all fear, the limbs trembling under her frock, the tongue trembling between her teeth. "I only thought that you——"

"Were a swindler." His fury struck her dumb. "So that's your point of view—the Rawley point of view. I'm glad I found it out in time. For the future," he turned from her as he spoke, "please understand that I don't need the Rawleys, or any other members of the peerage, to advise me in the conduct of my business."

As her husband made his way past her across the room, Gerald Cranston's lady would have given her very soul for speech. Every nerve-cell in her yearned to call him back, to cry out to him: "Gerald, I never meant to say that. Forgive me! Even though I can't understand, I'm willing to trust you." But though her blanched lips opened for speech, no speech came: and she could only watch him, wide-eyed, as he went; watch the door close; watch, and wait, and listen for his step across the hall, for the rattle of his stick in the stand, for the sound of the hall-door shutting and the sound of his feet in the porch.

When that last sound reached her, she realized herself—for the first time since Tony's death—on the verge of tears. . .

§ 2

Walking deliberate out of Aldford Street across Park Lane, Gerald Cranston's temper blinded him even to the tiny foundation of truth which underlay the falseness of Hermione's suspicions. His body was still under some control; but his brain had broken all bonds of discipline. The lava of his thoughts seethed; and by the incandescence of their seething, he saw his marriage-bargain in all its naked crudity. "You give," ran those thoughts. "She takes—despising you for the very giving." Despise! How dared she despise? What entitled *her* to sit in judgment on him? Had he not kept their bargain, in spirit as well as in letter? Had he not given her, freely and of his own accord, money for herself, money for another man's child, a home, servants, cars, jewellery—anything and everything that a woman of position could desire? And how had she requited him for his gifts? With the hope of a child? Not she! *She* had only requited him with insult, with ignominy, with slurs on his birth and unjust suspicions. Rawley, forsooth—so that was Rawley—injustice.

He entered the Park; and, halting, turned to look back on his home. Under the hot gray sky of a summer's afternoon, the place loomed suddenly forbidding, bereft of cheer, colourless. He hated it; hated even, as his eyes ranged upwards from the low wall of his Roman garden to the sloping eaves, that one solitary square of scarlet colour in it, which he knew for the blind of the night-nursery, downdrawn while Arthur slept.

Abruptly, he turned his back on the house and strode out, across the streaming traffic of the Park, on to gravel. He remembered the planned visit to his mother; decided against it. To go without Hermione might give "the old lady" some hint of his trouble. And with her, he had never shared his troubles—only his triumphs.

He came to the Achilles statue; to the Ladies' Mile. Children were riding. He watched them with blind eyes—his thoughts on his marriage, on its failure. For, of course, his marriage had failed. Hermione had not even given him the hope of a family. Hermione—curse her!—had requited his gifts with nothing save snobbish ingratitude. . .

"Steady!" said Cranston's brain to Cranston's temper.

Striding on again, erratically, his thoughts matching his gait, he remembered how he had talked business with Hermione at Studley; how they had talked furniture at the Ritz; the night when they had dined with her father, their conversation

on their return to the hotel. . . Hermione had seemed reasonable enough, fair enough, then. Pah! Her reasonableness, her fairness, had been mere artifices. She had trapped him. And he, like a fool, had fallen into the trap, yielded to her father's "diplomacy," settled fifty thousand on her, settled the house, the furniture. Not that she wasn't welcome to them. She was. He, Gerald Cranston, never went back on *his* bargains. Let her keep the money-counters. He didn't grudge them, never had grudged them. Only—let her keep her share of the bargain, keep civil, keep her hands off his business.

A little way down the Row, his gait slackened, and his thoughts with it. But his temper was still at fever-heat—reminding him of the night of their reception; of how she had denied herself to him; of how that night, and for many a night thereafter, he had been conscious of her physical appeal.

The memory stung. Man's physical passion! Woman's bodily appeal! In those two forces, lay destruction. He thanked God that he had dominated them; that Hermione had not enslaved him, as so many women enslaved their husbands, by the body; that his brain was still free; that, even in his rage, he had not lost all sense of reality, could see her for what she was—a bargain-breaker.

For the future, though, she should keep her share of the bargain as he had kept his!

And on that, the first blind incandescence of Cranston's fury gave way to a colder uglier rage.

Presently, resuming his old deliberate stride, he turned off the Row; came, past the Serpentine, to the tea-house. It was early yet, and the uncrowded chalet tempted him to meditation. He found himself a table; ordered himself a cooling drink; meditated, dangerously, for ten silent minutes. "Hermione suits me," ran his meditation. "She'll have to go on suiting me. That's in the bond."

Lighting a cigarette, he saw, with some surprise, that his fingers trembled; mastered their trembling; paid for his drink; threw away the cigarette; and, going on again, came back to the Serpentine.

All about the edge of the Serpentine, poor children were feeding the water-fowl, playing with boats, rolling hoops. Their parents laughed as they watched them. To Cranston, that laughter seemed the laughter of thieves. Coldly, displeasurably, eyeing the working-folk, he thought of the woman who had borne him no child to feed the water-fowl, to play with boat or hoop.

"You wouldn't consider it ridiculous if you'd been born a Rawley." By God, she should pay him for that insult. By God, was he to learn commercial morality from the Rawleys?

Cynically, he fell to considering the Rawleys. What did they represent? What had they done to raise themselves—as he, Cranston, had raised himself—above these poor working-folk? Nothing. Less than nothing! The Earl, for all his dignity, was an inefficient—Doxford an over-bearing official—Alan a slack-lipped young ass, only fit to draw the money of tax-payers like himself in a Regular Army which would not see war for a generation—Mildred a pompous old faggot who quoted second-hand opinions as her own—Cynthia a third-rate copy of Mildred. And yet, according to Hermione, these Rawleys were to have the monopoly of deciding between the ethically right and the ethically wrong; to dictate business morality to the efficients. Pah! Rawleys indeed—had any Rawley of the last three centuries made his own way unaided up the ladder of success? Pah! Rawleys forsooth—what privilege, what prerogative did the Rawleys possess save the rusty coat-of-arms which his money had furbished for them?

"The old aristocracy doesn't mean much nowadays. It's the new aristocracy, the plutocrats with titles who run things." The old thought repeated itself, expanded itself in Gerald Cranston's mind as he stood ruminant, his horn stick-point prodding the gravel. "Aristocracy," he ruminated; "and what is aristocracy except a commodity, sold, like any other commodity, to the highest bidder?"

After a while, he turned his back on the Serpentine; and resumed his walk over turf. He walked slowly now, as one who decides weighty matters. For temptation was on him, urging him to clinch the deal with Robert Walsh's party. That way—he could shew these Rawleys, shew them once and for all time, that their privileges, their prerogatives were no privileges, no prerogatives, that the birthright on which they so prided themselves could be bought, bought like a gew-gaw in a jeweller's shop, for the money they affected to despise.

"Buy the thing!" said temptation. "Buy your title and have done with it. What are scruples—what twenty thousand or twice twenty thousand—compared with teaching these Rawleys, this Hermione, their lesson?" And after yet another while, Cranston yielded to the easy temptation.

§ 3

His decision—though the cold rage still held—restored Cranston's self-control; and he began to consider the consequences of it. More than ever, in view of that decision, his marriage-bargain must stand, Hermione be held to the letter of her contract. "She'll have to get over her tantrums," he determined. "She'll have to learn that I'm not to be cheated of my children. . . "

By now, he was through Hyde Park and into Kensington Gardens. Ahead of him, green-vistaed, comforting to the eye, stretched a long avenue of oaks. Resolute in thought, vouchsafing never a glance at the passers-by—at the women with children, the women with dogs, and the women with husbands who crowded it—he took the avenue; and heard, before he had gone half-way down its green vista, a surprised voice calling to him: "Gerry! Whither away?"

The voice halted Cranston in mid-stride; and turning his head to it, he saw Angela Hemmingway, sitting under a tree. She rose as he halted; and a moment later slipped a gray-gloved hand into his.

She was all in gray—"to match the weather," she told him—gray veil, gray feathers in a gray hat, gray embroidery on a gray georgette frock, gray silk stockings and gray suede shoes. A gray parasol, furled, dangled on a jewelled crook from her wrist. While, from behind her—as though to complete the colour-scheme—a great gray dog lolled his scarlet tongue suspiciously at the newcomer.

"His name's Binky," proceeded Angela. "And he's my latest *beau*. Binky! Shake hands with your uncle Gerald."

The dog lifted a dignified paw; and Cranston, his self-composure restored by the chance meeting, acknowledged the salute by patting its long narrow back.

"Irish wolf-hound?" he asked.

"Yes." Angela laughed. "Binky's a real Sinn Feiner."

They talked dog for a minute. Then Angela—dubiously, for at first sight of him her every aptitude had leaped to the suspicion that Gerald's solitary walk, as Gerald's concentrated eyes, betokened some unusual stress—suggested a stroll.

"You needn't talk to me if your mind's on business," she chaffed. "And you can drop me whenever you like."

To her surprise, the suggestion of her company seemed to please him. He accepted it with alacrity, assuring her that business had never been further from his thoughts. "Then what *were* you thinking of?" she ventured as they set off

side-by-side, the wolf-hound's dignified head between. "Secrets again?"

"Yes. Secrets." To Cranston, the word recalled that evening in Curzon Street, her confession of loneliness. Angela's submissive silence—she knew better than to press any man for his confidences—pleased him; and they strolled on, mute, out of the avenue into sight of the Round Pond.

"Still lonely?" he asked, so suddenly that she could only answer:—

"Lonely? Do you mean me?"

"Yes. You."

"I'm not lonely—now I've got Binky. Am I, Binky dear?" Angela stopped to busy herself with the dog; but her thoughts were busy with Cranston. He had spoken—she realized—at random, out of the simplicity of his heart. But the random question had set her own heart leaping. "So you remembered?" she went on, her face upturning to his.

"I rather pride myself on my memory."

Again, Angela forbore to answer; but the blue eyes under her golden lashes flashed amiability at him, good fellowship. Fleetingly, contrasting them with those other eyes, violet and coldly hostile, he felt glad, perhaps for the first time in his strenuous life, of a chance-met woman's companionship.

Continuing their walk, they reached the Pond; and there halted, talking desultorily while they watched the miniature yacht-squadrons blown hither and thither about the shallow water.

"I often come here of an afternoon," remarked Angela casually. "It amuses me to watch the kiddies sailing their boats."

"Pretty hefty kiddies—some of them," retorted Cranston, indicating a couple of bearded men, long sticks under their arms, who came running by in pursuit of their erratically sailing clippers. "It always amazes me to see grown men playing with toys."

"Oh, we all have our toys," said Angela shrewdly. "You like making money—those two like sailing boats. There isn't much difference when you analyze things. By the way"—ever since their meeting, her brain had been trying to find some excuse for prolonging it—"what about tea? Have you had yours?"

"No. Not yet." To her renewed astonishment, he again fell in with the suggestion. "Is there anywhere hereabouts we could get a cup?"

"Let me think. The tea-house is sure to be packed. And besides, I hate food in the open air." Angela, flirting with the temptation to invite Gerald back to Curzon Street, began hesitantly. "There's a place somewhere in Knightsbridge. Hill's—I think it's called. Anyway, it's quite close. Just over there, by the Empress Rooms."

"That'll do," he said.

Turning their backs on the Round Pond, they went, the hound at heel, out of Kensington Gardens; across Knightsbridge; and into the tea-shop: where, having passed a counter piled high with redolent chocolates, they presently found themselves ensconced opposite one another at an exiguous corner-table, between the legs of which Binky, at a word from Angela, promptly curled his own.

Cranston, somewhat out of his element, ordered tea from an obliging waitress; and—the pot and cakes being promptly brought—subsided into polite monosyllables. The place was far too crowded for any but the habitual banalities of tea-time; his mind still far too self-occupied for any other form of conversation. The quarrel with Hermione, his sudden rage, and the double decision he had reached just before the moment of his meeting with Angela, seemed to have exhausted his cerebral vitality. He felt stupidly content to watch his chance companion, who now, lifting the gray veil from her face, and stripping the gray gloves off her pale hands, proceeded with a calm, "Sugar, Gerry? How many lumps? Milk? A lot or a little?" to take charge of the entertainment. "You look fagged," she told him, handing over the cup.

"I believe I am—a little. One way and another, I've had a pretty harassing week."

As Gerald spoke, his fingers touched Angela's—accidentally, yet thrilling her with their contact. "Poor Gerry!" she whispered—knowing instinctively that the "harassing week" was a prevarication, that he was sore, vexed about something. "You over-work yourself. If I were Hermione, I should insist on your getting into the country every week-end."

He frowned at that; and immediately her intuition leaped to the fact that it must be Hermione who had vexed him. The intuitive certainty pleased her. Her own hopes rose. "Hermione never did have any sense," she decided. Then her imagination started in to play with her hopes, to exaggerate them, to plan other meetings; till, helping him to his second cup of tea—he had drained the first at one steady gulp—the Rawley humour in her came uppermost. "He loves me," she thought

whimsically, " he loves me not. He loves his wife—he loves her not. Heigh-ho, what fools we women are."

" What's amusing you ? " asked Cranston, noticing the faint smile on her lips.

" Binky," she parried, glad of the hound who, at that particular moment, rose up, nearly over-turning the table, to thrust a lean muzzle into her hand. " He wants an éclair. Do you think you can afford it ? "

" Better than Binky," expostulated Cranston, also emerging from reverie. " You'll kill that dog if you give him éclairs."

Angela, however, insisted that " just one couldn't possibly do him any harm " ; and, Binky having approved the diet and slavering greedily for more, they fed him—to the waitress's amusement—a cream-bun, two ham-sandwiches, and the remnants of their buttered scones.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

§ 1

"ANGELA really is a pleasant creature," thought Gerald Cranston; and, paying for their tea, leaving the tea-shop, suggesting—a suggestion laughingly refused—the purchase of some expensive chocolates, clean forgot that the pleasant creature was a Rawley, a member—however distant the connection—of that family against whom, less than an hour previously, he had very nearly sworn social vendetta.

Unversed in the science of his own emotions, it did not occur to him—as it did occur to her—that he owed some of his pleasure in her society to the quarrel with Hermione. While as for her emotions, emotions wherein humour blended with temperament, and apprehension with expectancy, and passionate hope with passionate jealousy—of these he comprehended never a one.

He could not realize, as they strolled down Knightsbridge towards the Albert Hall, that the woman at his side, the woman who, watching him covertly, knew from the very out-jut of his chin the innate Puritanism, the innate rigidity of his views, was already wise to the possibility of contest between herself and that other woman he had left in Aldford Street. He could not dream that she already dreaded, far more than any woman-enemy, the enemy of his self-control. He could not hear, as—their stroll ended—he hailed her a taxi, that sudden palpitation of the heart which told her, more clearly than any science, how much, how cravingly she desired him.

To Cranston, handing them into the cab, excusing himself with lifted hat from accompanying them, little Angela and big Binky and their communal tea in a Kensington tea-shop represented only an interlude, the shortest of short entr'actes in the drama of his strenuous life.

Once more, striding back across the Park, his mind perpended that drama, and the new act of it which his double decision had uncurtained. He was no longer aware of any rage against

Hermione. Self-control had extinguished the burning lava of his temper, coagulated it to a solid obstinacy. "I'll cure her tantrums for her," he thought grimly, looking once again on his own roof-tree.

The sky above that roof-tree was still gray, gray as that material success to which its owner dreamed himself fearlessly dedicate; and as he crossed Park Lane, the first fat rain-drops of a summer shower splattered on the dusty pavement. He rang as he let himself in with his latch-key, asked one of the answering footmen: "Has Nurse brought Sir Arthur home yet?"

"They came in half-an-hour back, sir."

"Good." Cranston flicked the rain-drops from his blue-serge coat-sleeve. "Did anyone call?"

"Yes, sir." Smithers, appearing mysteriously from the back of the hall, spoke in a conspiratorial voice. "Mr Rawley's in the morning-room."

"With her ladyship?"

"No, sir. Mr. Rawley didn't wish to see her ladyship. He particularly asked for you. I told him you were out, sir—but he insisted on waiting."

"How long has Mr. Rawley been here?"

"The best part of an hour, sir."

"All right. I'll see him."

Cranston passed into the morning-room. "I wonder what sort of a mess *you're* in," he thought, shaking hands with Alan, who—at the first sound of his key in the hall-lock—had risen nervously from the armchair by the fireplace, and was now half-way across the carpet.

For, even to one less trained in instant observance of his fellow-man than the master of Fifteen A. Aldford Street, Alan's demeanour would have betrayed Alan's perturbation. His, "Hallo, Gerald. Hope you didn't mind my waiting," sounded forced. The skin of his palm felt cold—clammy with moisture. His pink-and-white complexion had sallowed. His lower lip sagged. His eyes were bloodshot. Worry had pencilled the fine lines at his temples. Even perfect grooming could not hide his mental dishevelment.

"Sorry I kept you so long," said Cranston. "You're not looking up to much. What's the trouble? Women?"

The young subaltern, who had started at the word "trouble", begged the question. "There's something I'd rather like your advice about," he began. "I wonder if you could spare me ten minutes? It's—it's rather a private matter."

"I've got a good deal to do before dinner." Cranston,

thinking of the letter he had determined to write Walsh, looked at his watch. "But I can give you five minutes. As the matter's private, perhaps we'd better discuss it in my room."

Then he opened the door of the sanctum, ushered in his visitor, closed the door and indicated a chair by his desk with a terse, "Sit down there, won't you?"

Alan took the indicated seat; and, facing his brother-in-law across the desk, said slowly: "I say, you won't let what I'm going to tell you go any further?"

"Naturally not—if it's in confidence."

"Thanks awfully. Well—to tell you the truth, I've made rather a fool of myself."

"I gathered that—from your appearance. But why," Cranston's tone sounded curiously hostile, "if you have made a fool of yourself, come to me about it? Why not go to your father?"

"The governor's away." The boy's fingers interlocked round one knee. "And besides, it isn't the sort of thing I could talk to him about. The governor's not much of a sportsman, you know."

"He'll be back on Tuesday." Cranston, ignoring the implied compliment, felt his anger re-incandesce. "Rawley!" he thought. "So that's Rawley—afraid of his own father."

But Alan's next words startled him. "Tuesday'll be too late," blurted out the young man. "I've got to find the cash by Monday morning—or send in my papers."

"How much?" The question was automatic.

"A couple of hundred."

"How did it happen? Gambling?"

The boy nodded.

"Cards or horses?"

"Cards. Poker." Alan fell silent.

"And to whom did you lose it?"

Hesitantly, the boy gave two names. "They're racing chaps, you know. And those sort of blokes always settle on Monday."

"Really?" Sarcasm crisped the inquisitor's voice. "And what do these racing friends of yours propose doing if you don't settle by Monday? Gambling debts aren't actionable, you know."

"They're debts of honour," said Alan stubbornly.

"Quite so. That's why people have no right to sit down to play higher stakes than they can afford. Go on, please. What happens if you don't settle by Monday?"

"Well——"

All Cranston s business training saw the boy's nerve wilt; all the soldier in him impelled the further query: "Are these men threatening to inform your Colonel?"

"Not in so many words." Suddenly, Alan threw his cards on the table. "But you see, the fact is—I told you I'd made an awful ass of myself—that I gave them cheques."

"Post-dated?"

"No—not exactly. They promised they'd hold them over until Monday morning."

"You mean, you asked them to?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Cranston fell silent. Watching him, Alan could perceive no hope behind the unchanging blue of his eyes.

"I—I'm devilish sorry to bother you like this, Gerald. Two hundred's a lot. But I'm not asking you to give me the money. I—I'm only asking for it as a loan. I—I'll pay you back a pony a month. Honestly, I will. For God's sake don't let me down. This—this cheque business," Hermione's brother rose as he spoke, and began pacing nervously up and down the carpet, "is driving me dotty. It's been a lesson to me—the devil's own lesson, I can tell you. If I were kicked out of the Regiment, it'd break the governor's heart."

"Pull yourself together—and sit down." Cranston spoke sternly—for there was no pity in him, only contempt. "So that's Rawley," he mused. "Weak. Foolish. Cowardly. Only telling the truth under compulsion."

The boy obeyed; and for a full minute his brother-in-law, once more silent, debated whether he should help him or no. "Weaklings to the wall," he thought scornfully. "Why should I help *this* Rawley?" Then another thought—and his lust for secret power—intervened. Helping this Rawley, might he not possess himself of a secret weapon against all the Rawleys?

"Listen," he said at last. "If I consent to lend you this money, will you pledge me your word that nobody shall know of it? Nobody. Do you understand me? Not even," the words froze, "your sister."

"You will help me then?" The sallow face brightened.

"On that condition. Is it agreed?"

"I'll agree to anything. I won't tell a soul. Honour bright I won't. If only you'll help me. It's," gratitude stammered over, "it's too decent of you, Gerald. Too damn decent. I—I don't know how on earth to thank you."

"We won't discuss that aspect of the matter, please."

Cranston's voice rasped. There was no pity in him. Alan's gratitude sounded false in his stubborn ears. False pride deafened the call of his stubborn heart. Unlocking the drawer of his desk, drawing out his cheque-book, signing the cheque, and passing it over to the eager fingers, his only pleasure in the good deed was the pleasure of power—cold, inhuman, purposeful.

§ 2

His brother-in-law had been gone a good five minutes; but Gerald Cranston still stood, silent and motionless, by the big desk under the big alabaster centre-light. Momentarily, his powers of concentration had deserted him. Anger, false pride, the will-to-power—above all, the will-to-dominate the woman whose face stared up at him from a gold-framed photograph on the desk-top—played havoc with his brain. The boy's words when they parted, "I'll never forget this, Gerald, never so long as I live," rang vainly at the locked door of his furious heart. Curse all Rawleys! Their need, as the world's need, was money. Well—he had given them money. To hell with their pretences of gratitude.

Finally, controlling the havoc of his brain, he picked up Alan's receipt from his desk; strode to the safe; twisted the combination-knob three times; took the steel key of his private drawer from his key-chain; opened the drawer and locked the stamped document away. "It's worth two hundred," he thought grimly, "to have one of these cheap aristocrats in my power. Aristocracy! Titles! Pah! Money buys them all."

Then, suppressed rage urging him to translate that last thought into action, he twirled home the knob of the safe; returned to his desk; sat down, and, drawing a piece of paper from the rack, began his letter to Robert Walsh.

Writing that letter, no memory of bygone scruples whispered to him, even vaguely, that the thing of his planning was a crime against his own code. Finishing it, marking the envelope "Confidential", sealing the envelope, ringing to instruct a footman that he should deliver it instanter at the Lustrum, his business code—as his fear of woman—was momentarily in abeyance.

The thing done, he clicked off the sanctum lights and went deliberately upstairs. As he went, false pride and the will-to-dominate were still on him. Hardly, when he came to the door of Arthur's room, could he turn the handle. "Cosgrave's

child!" he thought. "Hermione's child! Where is my own?"

The night-nursery, save for the pink-shaded fairylight, was in darkness; and Arthur alone. "I's waited a long time for you, Steppy," he called across the room. "I's not asleep. Turn on the lights."

Cranston obeyed; and went, hands in pockets, his face inscrutable, towards the cot.

"Why didn't you come before?" asked the child, his brown eyes staring wistful from the pillow.

"Because I had work to do, youngster."

"But I's been wanting you—badly."

"Why?" Cranston spoke gruffly; yet Arthur's words had penetrated—a tiny needle-point of affection—through the armour of his rage. "Poor little mite," he thought, "it's not his fault that his mother——"

"'Cos Nannie's so stupid," went on the mite. "I tolded her it was too hot for blankets. But she said Mummy persisted on two. Take *one* off. Do!"

"Hot, are you?"

"Yes—dreffly."

"Well, we'll see what we can manage."

Cranston, stooping from his great height to do the baby's bidding, could feel the little limbs almost feverishly warm under the bed-clothes. "That better?" he asked, untucking the top blanket and folding it back over the foot of the cot. Then, disturbed by the sound of a turning door-handle, he looked up and saw his wife. . .

Hermione—though a rope of his pearls glistered on her pale skin and Syrett had already dressed her dark hair—was still in bedroom negligé. As she came across the room towards him, Cranston saw—half hidden and half revealed by the figured crimson silk of her kimono—the full splendour of her shape.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, facing him across the cot.

"The child's got too many blankets on." Cranston's tone was curt; but his eyes, fastening on the delicate moulding of her arms, on the curve of bosom which shewed soft and white above the lace of her corsage, widened as though in passion. "Dominate her," said the rage and the power-lust in him. "Master her! Break her to your will!" Yet already, ghost-like behind the rage and the power-lust, moved fear.

"I told Nurse only to put on two." Hermione spoke equably. For hours she had been thinking of Gerald, yearning to see him again, to apologize for her outburst, wondering, hoping, fearing

what the tears she had shed might portend. That was why she had donned his pearls—that was why, hearing his steps in the nursery, she had come swiftly up to him. Surely, here, in Arthur's room, they could make up their difference. Surely, here, at Arthur's bedside, one quiet word would shew him that she had spoken in haste—rashly—out of a heart that wished him only well. But no trace of the tears they had shed shewed in those dark eyes; and to Cranston, they seemed hostile as the eyes he had looked on early that afternoon.

"I took one off," he said, still curtly; and Arthur, looking up at the two of them, echoed: "Yes. Steppy took one off. 'Cos I was so hot."

"He'll catch cold. It's chilly of a morning."

Hermione tried to speak calmly; but emotion troubled her voice. For suddenly, strangely, she was aware of a double jealousy—of a jealousy against the child, who trusted Gerald; and a jealousy against Gerald, who cared for the child. "Arthur's mine," cried the first jealousy. "Mine only. What right has Gerald to interfere." "Gerald's mine," whispered the second jealousy. "He has no right to care for Arthur more than he cares for me."

"He'll do nothing of the sort." Now, in Cranston's voice, too, was emotion; for suddenly, strangely, he felt his will-to-power weaken; felt his fear of woman moving beneath it.

"In course I won't catch cold, Mummy," chorused Arthur. And on that, overwhelmingly, the first jealousy—the mother-jealousy—had its way with Hermione Cranston, driving all thought of the planned apology from her mind.

"You must allow Mummy to know best, dear," she said; and bending, set her hands to replace the blanket.

For a moment, the will-to-power held; tautening every muscle in Gerald Cranston's frame. For a moment, watching his wife as she bent to undo his work, his hands itched to seize her by the shoulders, by the wrists—to prevent her, somehow, anyhow, from defying him. Her shoulders and her wrists were white—white as that curve of bosom which still hypnotized him—white and terribly desirable. Imaginatively, he felt them in his grip, felt the whole soft splendour of her shape crushed to him, struggling with him, yielding to him. Imaginatively, he heard his own voice hoarse and masterful, crying to her as she yielded: "You're mine, mine!"

Then the moment passed—and swiftly, stealthily, triumphantly, his fear came in upon him, calling: "Even so—even so, Gerald Cranston—you yield yourself to passion!"

Hermione was still busied with the blankets; but now, watching her wrists at their work, watching her shoulders as they bent over the child's cot, Cranston's hands no longer itched to seize them. It was as though, at fear's call, some devil all of ice had entered into him. "She suited you," whispered that ice-devil. "She suited you—let that be all."

"Steppy," protested the child, "Steppy, don't let her. I's so hot."

But Arthur's step-father heard only the whisper of the ice-devil, the call of his especial fear. "Put the woman away," called the fear. "Put her out of your sight. All else is weakness."

At last, Hermione rose up from her work; and in the instant that her eyes clashed resolute against his, Cranston, fear-hounded and passion-hounded, felt the rage and the will-to-power in him fuse to the rock of unalterable decision. He wanted nothing of this woman who had insulted him, defied him, wanted no child by her, no yielding from her. Their intimacy must end—end! All else would be weakness, a surrender to those passions he had always despised. . . "Discipline," whispered the ice-devil in him, "discipline."

Arthur protested once more. His mother's voice calmed him: "Never mind, darling. It'll be nice and cool in the country."

And this time, Cranston heard. As their eyes clashed again, he remembered his wife's holiday-plans—the fortnight she and Arthur were to spend at Studley, the month at Shanklin, the country-house visits on which he was to accompany them for the partridge-driving, for the pheasant-shooting. It still lacked three weeks—cried the fear in him—to the start of those holidays.

"Yes," he said—and the very tone was a whip-lash across his wife's face; "yes, youngster. It'll be cooler in the country. That's one reason why the sooner your mother takes you there the better."

"Gerald!" Stark bewilderment wrenched the ejaculation from Hermione's lips.

But her husband was already on his heel. "Good-night, youngster," he called over his shoulder. "Never mind about the blankets. Nannie and your mother shall take you down to Studley before the end of next week."

Watching his back as he went slowly across the night-nursery, Gerald Cranston's lady felt all the Rawley, all the woman and all the wife in her stiffen with revolt.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

§ 1

BEREFT of love, your average male and your average female are essential incompatibles. Thus it was now with Gerald Cranston and his Hermione.

They had no further quarrel; but no reconciliation, no faintest attempt at reconciliation, took place between them. They did not actually hate one another; because their instincts forbade even the solace of hatred. Indifference rather than anger describes their mutual emotions. It was as though their souls built themselves, each against each, and either side the abyss that yawned between them, stout castles of reticence through the arrow-slits of whose walls neither might perceive the other's viewpoint: but only—for the sex-abyss between them yawned deeper than sex, deeper than any mere antagonism of male to female—below the arrow-slits, broad-channelled by the centuries, unforded and unfordable, that river of caste and prejudice whereon her kind had oared it proudly for twenty generations while his had been humble fisher-folk, delving and poaching along the guarded banks.

So, for five days (almost as though they typified the blind unreasoning class-war of their period) Earl's daughter and corn-chandler's son lived out the antagonistic hours under that luxurious roof-tree which Gerald Cranston, half in fear of passion and half in pride of money, had imagined them to be fashioning, not by mutual love but by mutual discipline, into a veritable home. So, each blind to the best in each—the one deeming his weakness strength, and the other deeming her false pride dignity—those two went awhile their separate ways.

§ 2

And at first, as the Rolls bore her swiftly out of London, that separate way seemed very good to the Lady Hermione. It would be pleasant, she imagined, more than pleasant, to be

apart from this man who had treated her and was still treating her as though she had been a naughty child; this man whose implacable politeness and implacable resolution had made any attempt at reconciliation so impossible.

Once at Studley, however, once in those green solitudes with the little son to whom—whatsoever of injury it might have brought her own dignity—this second marriage of hers had brought only good, the first fury of her resentment passed; and she began to regain a little of her old whimsical life-outlook. Away from Gerald, their quarrel soon assumed a ridiculous rather than a tragic aspect.

She was still as far from understanding the man she had married as from perceiving those subconscious urges which, exciting her interest in him, had actually provoked their quarrel. Yet she did perceive, vaguely through the haze of her young mind, that the blame for that quarrel had not been entirely his. "Though I don't love him," went her thoughts, "though I never pretended to love him, I needn't misjudge him."

From which—her self-knowledge developing a little—she started in to consider her obligations under that unspoken bargain.

Had she or had she not fulfilled those obligations? It came to her, not all at once, but slowly as the weeks went by, that she had at best only half fulfilled them; that, on her side, there had always been reluctances, mental reservations, a shirking of the essential issue. A man—after all, one couldn't quite leave out the physical side of matrimony—needed more than mere passive acquiescence from his wife. Tony had taught her that.

All the same, her class-consciousness endured; and although, during the weeks which followed, there were moments when she would have given a good deal to unsay her taunt and apologize to Gerald—one moment even, when she conceived an almost uncontrollable impulse to "run up to Town—just for the night"; although every time she wrote to him, the words, "I'm sorry we had that trouble just before I went away" trembled on the tip of her pen, she made him no apology, paid him no visit, never penned a single word of intimacy in the cold dutiful chronicle of hotel or country-house trivialities which reached him with a regularity that matched his own.

§ 3

Not that any loveless apology would have availed to heal the breach!

Cranston, at least during the first month of separation, remained more than ever Cranston. His regular letters struck a note even colder, even more dutiful, more trivial than Hermione's. For him, permanently as he imagined in his stubborn self-control, she became neither more nor less than any of those other casual women who had "suited him" in the past.

Yet strangely, once relieved of her actual presence, he experienced no desire to rid himself of her—as he had rid himself of those other women. No longer his woman, she was nevertheless his wife—a retainer, in the same way that his clerks were his retainers, or his footmen, or his secretaries. Owing her no affection, he still owed her (and himself) a duty—the duty of carrying her, willy nilly, up the ladder of success—a duty all the more difficult because she, unlike his other retainers, could be no help, but only a hindrance to his progress.

For of course—said that ice-devil which had entered into Gerald Cranston—she *had* hindered him; had served only to sap his vitality, to deflect the compass-needle of his intellect from its magnetic north—Business.

Now, however—thanks, as he thought in his delusion, to his own self-discipline—the compass-needle of his intellect pointed once again truly; and truly, still steadfast in delusion, he swore to set his course by it. Off that course—he swore—neither wife nor woman, neither longing for his own man-child nor thought for another's, should let yaw, even by a wheel-point, the steady ship of his career.

And all that August, while other mariners, less over-confident, weather-wiser, were reefing sails and battening hatches against the storms ahead, he, captain of industry, furled him never a jib. If he closed a gamble here, reduced a commitment there, it was only to open some other gamble, to enlarge his main commitment, "Cranston's": and the Bank overdraft touched the hundred thousand the day before the first of the "Red-and-Black fleet"—those light lorries with "Cranston's Coals. From Colliery to Consumer" carried banner-wise on their sign-boards—delivered its first load into his own cellars at Fifteen A. Aldford Street, and that purposeful, black-eyed, thick-set, three-thousand-a-year Northumbrian, Sandeman, his eyes lighting with their first enthusiasm, said confidently, "They're laughing at us on the Coal Exchange, but they'll laugh the other side of their faces when there's more coal than customers, and *we've* got a hundred of those trucks running from Poplar to Highgate."

All the other branches of the company, "the agricultural branches," as Sir James Guthrie called them in his tabulations,

reported troubles, reduced profits, difficulties. Morrison, raving against the moulders' strike, was at his wit's end to maintain their moderate output of farm-machinery. Farmers, driven desperate by Free Trade and high wages, were threatening to let this year's arable go back to next year's grass. The Nitrate Ring had cut its prices—and the value of Cranston's fertilizer-stock with them. Foreign flour was being imported to the detriment of Cranston's mills. All the more reason, then, to thank the Lord that milling and manures and machinery were all subordinate to the master money-maker, Coal.

Gradually, too, in his rage for business, Cranston forgot his anger against Hermione's family. Alan's expected plea for "a little more time" to pay the first instalment off his debt roused no animosity, only a grim amusement, in him. Rorkton, whom, in the heat of his fury, he had almost asked for his resignation, remained on the Board; dined even, after his first Board-meeting, with his son-in-law; and remained till nearly midnight in the sanctum at Aldford Street, discussing, as he sipped his barley-water, the prospects of Marankari.

For why, all said and done, should one whose every ounce of brain was now concentrated on his career, quarrel with the influential Rawleys? His, Cranston's, quarrel was with his wife—and with her only. Let the thing remain private between them. A secret! A secret whose existence no-one—not even his mother—need ever guess!

§ 4

So, all through that month which followed Hermione's departure, Cranston, resolute for money-making, resolute for secrecy of their rupture, flung himself back into the old life—into the rigorously self-disciplined, almost womanless existence he had led before his marriage. So, his brain absorbed by the manifold intricacies of his manifold financiering, he forgot those physical forces whereto, unmarried, he had always accorded his grudging recognition.

And even when—for no man of Cranston's type may entirely deny his body—those physical forces began to obtrude on the mental, he was not precisely aware of them; was aware only of occasional lapses from concentration, of occasional irritabilities, and of certain peculiar dissatisfactions with life in general, which neither the frenzy of his work nor the luxury of his home seemed quite able to placate.

One by one—his mother the first of them—his social friends,

his business acquaintances, each and every companion of his exiguous relaxations, went out of London; and with their going, home, that disciplined home which had been his pride, grew lonely—lonely and a little oppressive. The very size of it, the very perfection of its domestic arrangements, began to irritate him as he wandered here and there—and always a servant at his beck—about the empty rooms.

For—though these, too, remained hidden from his perception—other forces, stranger, stronger forces than the mere physical, were at work in the male animal whom men called Gerald Cranston. The urge for his own children was once more stirring, subconsciously, to life in him; and the love for another man's child, strive as he might to suppress it, manifested itself renewingly every time his wanderings about the house brought him to the locked door of the night-nursery.

But the fear, that subconscious fear of love which dominated this man as surely as he dominated Cranston's, held all these forces at bay; and of Hermione, save as an inefficient retainer, he would not allow himself to think.

Instead, gradually—so gradually that, looking back, he could not realize how the process started in him—he began to think of Angela Hemmingway.

Since their chance meeting on the day of his quarrel with Hermione, he had met Angela but three times: once, that same evening, at the theatre; once over a friend's dinner-table; and once, just for a moment, in Bond Street. Yet those meetings, and especially the last one, during which she had told him that "Binky needs a good rest, so I'm taking him to Cromer for a month," lingered emphatically and persistently in his memory. He began to wonder whether she were yet back from her holidays; why, if she were back, he had seen no sign of her. Once even, walking alone under moonlight by the Round Pond, he knew a sudden desire for her companionship, a sudden impulse, immediately controlled, to call at the house and ascertain when she was expected.

And the next evening, they met. The meeting, fortuitous on his part, somewhat less fortuitous on hers, was of the ordinariest. He, leaving his car at the garage, had strolled past his house and out into the Park; she and the wolf-hound Binky were wandering in solitary splendour up and down the ring of turf under the trees in Stanhope Gate. Cranston lifted his hat. The dog offered a paw, the woman a hand. Cromer—said the woman—had been "beastly." "Nothing but trippers." She was glad to be back in Town. "Though it's only for a few

days." After that—she thought—it wouldn't be a "bad scheme" to try France. Indeed, she'd already applied for her passport. He suggested they should sit down. They sat down —Binky couched between them.

"So you're a grass-widower?" said Angela lightly. "Where's Hermione?"

He frowned at her reference to his wife, as he had frowned once before; and, realizing the mere mention distasteful to him, she thought: "So I was right. They did quarrel that afternoon. And they haven't made it up yet." Laying herself out to be amiable, she felt how clever she had been in returning to Town. He was so obviously pleased to see her, so obviously lonely, over-worked, in need of distraction.

"Hard at it?" she asked.

"Harder than ever!"

"That's the worst of being a millionaire."

"Or the best of it."

The acridness of his retort frightened her. Supposing—supposing he really were in love with Hermione; were taking the matrimonial tiff to heart? But another glance at him reassured her fright. He looked work-weary, not—love-lorn.

She changed the conversation; and for a full half-hour he seemed content to sit talking of this and that, of the threatened stoppage at the pits, and the wet summer, and a new play he had seen. She, too, felt content—content and semi-sure of victory. The very emptiness of the Park—the deserted seats, the almost motorless roadway, the couples (lonely as they!) strolling here and there under the already browning trees—seemed omens of her triumph. "We're like babes in the wood," she commented; and fell silent, watching the tops of the omnibuses parade slowly above the railings between them and the great blank bulk of Chesterfield House.

Cranston, too, had fallen silent—one hand caressing Binky's well-mannered head. At last, abruptly, he asked: "What are you doing with yourself to-night?"

"Nothing in particular," Angela poked an ivory parasol-point into the turf, "or in general."

"Then why not dine with me?"

The invitation excited her; and this time no instinct warned her not to rush her fences. "I'd love to," she said simply.

"Splendid." He looked at his watch. "It's just a quarter-to-eight. I'll run home and dress; be at your place by a quarter-past."

"You needn't hurry, Gerry." She smiled at his impatience. "I'm not a quick-change artist."

"Then don't change." He looked at her, appraising the neatness, the cool frailty of her gray costume. "We'll go to a grill-room."

"And you?"

"I must." He laughed. "I've been at my new depots most of the day. Watching coal-heavers."

"It *sounds* rather dirty." She held out her hand as he rose to go. "Run along and change if you really want to. Binky and I can wait here."

And that night they dined at a little restaurant in Dover Street, the Basque.

§ 5

There was nothing intimate about that dining; nothing that might have suggested, even to the most romantic of Italian waiters, the possibility of a liaison. Not once, all the while they sat facing one another across the round table in the window of the softly-lit room, where only a few other out-of-season diners made up the sparse company, did conversation dip below the surface of every-day. Neither with their lips nor with their eyes did the big tawny-headed man in the black smoking-jacket or the little exquisitely jewelled woman in the silver-spangled toque, whose chatter entertained him from the Russian caviare which began their meal to the Turkish coffee which ended it, betray a single scintilla of that personal interest which is the surest prelude to an "affair."

Yet interested they were; the man pleasurably; and the woman passionately—so passionately that when, leaving her on the doorstep of her home, he suggested, with his usual calm, that "perhaps she could manage another dinner before she went away," she decided, on the instant, to cancel all plans for leaving London.

But of the hope behind the cancellation of those plans, Cranston knew nothing. To him, all through that first fortnight which followed their first dinner together, Angela's intentions remained hidden: while as for his own, they, if intentions they could be called, were merely intentions for companionship.

She pleased him—as Herimone, or so it seemed to him, had never pleased; interested him; stimulated his intelligence; talked to him of pictures, books, music; distracted his mind

from the City or listened to his City-gossip (she was enormously interested in money-matters) with equal facility. Briefly—she charmed him. But her charm, as yet, held nothing of sex, nothing to prick his conscience. If she never entered Fifteen A. Aldford Street, it was only because, since Hermione's departure, no woman except his mother had entered Fifteen A. Aldford Street. If he only mentioned her occasionally in his bi-weekly letters to his wife, it was simply because, in those letters, he mentioned so little of his own doings.

Nevertheless, by the end of that first fortnight, they had drifted, Angela steering, into a definite intimacy. Knowing her always at his call, always eager for his presence, he had begun to rely upon her, to look forward, during those long hours in the City, hours which every day made more strenuous—for now, each letter from Harold reiterated the certainty that the miners would not rest content with the concessions offered them—to the evenings spent in her company, to the relief of putting aside his business annoyances for the trivialities with which she knew so well how to entertain him.

And as September waned, the intimacy waxed, growing dangerous and more dangerous with their every meeting.

§ 6

It was not, however, till a certain October afternoon when, driving home unusually early from Pinner s Court, he conceived, all on a sudden, the intensest desire to make her some tangible return for the pleasure she had given him, that Gerald Cranston awoke to any recognition of the essential masculinity in his own feelings, or of the essential femininity in Angela Hemmingway.

And even then, the recognition was only partial. Primarily, the thought of making Angela a present merely flattered the power-impulse in him. Ordering Havers to stop at Cartier's; selecting, on the advice of a princely assistant, one of those slender, flexible bracelets of black enamel key-patterned with tiny diamonds, which were the rage of the moment; paying for the thing (it was cheap enough, and, writing out his cheque for the paltry hundred guineas, he gave no more thought to its price than he would have given to the price of a dozen neckties); thanking the assistant, and thrusting the case into his pocket, Cranston's sensations were scarcely more than those of a debtor grateful for the financial ability to pay his debts. "It's just right," he thought, stepping back into his car. "Not too valuable and not too valueless for a . . . a souvenir."

All the same, as his car gathered way for Aldford Street, Hermione Cranston's husband did, just for a moment, realize that jewellery, given by a man-of-the-world to a woman, held a special significance; remembered, also, smiling a little at the memory, one of Angela's pet sayings: "I believe in platonic friendship—but not in platonic pearls." Fortunately, these weren't pearls—only diamonds—and very tiny ones at that. Still . . .

He dismissed the unpleasant thought, and—quite impersonally, he imagined—fell to considering the general relationship between sex and sex. Most men, why not admit the fact? couldn't live without a woman. Most men, deciding, as he had decided, to break with their wives, would have taken, or at least been on the look-out for, a mistress. Woman, to most men, represented as concrete a want as their clothes, or their food, or the roof which sheltered them from the weather. Most men, of course, were fools. That was why anyone who had sufficient self-discipline to rid himself, as he had rid himself, of that particular want, was bound, in ultimate issues, to succeed. Still . . .

But from that last "Still . . ." (which a psychologist might have interpreted, "If woman *is* a necessity, why not Angela?") both the subconscious fears and the innate decencies of Gerald Cranston's nature bounded away as a roaming cheetah bounds away from a camp-fire.

Once out of his car and into his sanctum, moreover, all sex-thoughts disappeared from his mind. He poured himself one of those evening pegs to which he had taken since Hermione's departure; drank it; and turned to the evening mail, which Rennie had arranged according to custom in a little pile on his desk. Atop of that pile lay a large square envelope marked, in his father-in-law's indubitable handwriting, "Private and Confidential."

"Marankari at last," thought Cranston; and, sweeping the rest of his correspondence on one side, sat down to his desk; slit the sealed flap; extracted a fat wad of foolscap; skimmed through the Earl's covering letter in a flash, and started to study Gordon Ibbotsleigh's eagerly awaited report on the tin-mine.

Studying, his eyes frowned. The first page, dated two months back from "Prospecting Camp, Marankari, by runner to Kano", did not read well; the second worse; the third worst of all.

Cranston, reading on, continued to frown. His researches

on tin-mining had been deep enough for him to realize, despite the technicalities of it, that Ibbotsleigh's report could be summed up in a sentence. Matters at Marankari stood in exactly the same position as they had stood when the old workings were abandoned on the outbreak of the campaign in German West Africa. "I might have guessed as much," he ruminated savagely.

On the last page of the report, however, and underlined to mark its importance, there occurred a paragraph which changed the entire tenor of his ruminations.

"So much," wrote the mining engineer, "for the alluvial aspect of our property, on which I thought better to report fully as above before reiterating my conviction that Marankari is a rock-tin proposition, and that the main lode, as I have all along suspected from the large lumps of ore occasionally disclosed in the alluvial wash, does exist. With the sole object of locating this lode, I have at the moment of writing commenced the sinking of several shafts on the spur between the old creek and the river-bed. Until these shafts are through the over-burden, I prefer to reserve judgment. I am, however, still very hopeful of eventual success."

"And if he does succeed," thought Cranston, leaning back in his chair and letting his mind dwell on the immense earning-powers (with tin at two hundred pounds a ton) of even the smallest true lode, "if he does succeed, it means a fortune." Folding up the foolscap, he re-read Rorkton's letter. Rorkton, obviously, was on edge. His proposal that they should cable Ibbotsleigh, and ask for an immediate supplementary report, smacked of the financial amateur. "Where's the hurry?" thought Cranston. "Either the lode's there, or it isn't. If it is . . ."

But at that, he, too, felt himself on edge. With a fortune in the balance, why shouldn't they cable? By now, Ibbotsleigh's shafts must be through the over-burden. A mining-engineer, all said and done, was only a subordinate. One had the right to immediate information from him. Besides, if there were no chance of finding the lode, it would be far better to recall the man at once and so save what one could of the original five thousand.

"We'd better cable," he thought.

Then another thought struck him. If they cabled, to what address should they ask Ibbotsleigh to reply? To Rorkton's? The Earl, like the rest of the world, was on holiday, country-house visiting, one week here, one week there. The servants at Great

Cumberland Place ought not to be entrusted with the duty of transmitting such important news. Item, the Earl had no cable-address.

On the other hand, though, to mention his own telegraphic-address, "CRANSTONIA, LONDON", would be tantamount to admitting his own share in the venture. Well, why not? Why, under pledge of secrecy, shouldn't he admit it to Ibbotsleigh? Ibbotsleigh was a business-man, a sound fellow. He was a long way off, too, out of touch with gossipers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

§ 1

ALL day, Angela Hemmingway had been impatient, fretful, chafing. All day, bereft of Gerald's presence, she had been analyzing her passion for him—analyzing the hopelessness of her desires. For they were hopeless—hopeless, said the humour in her, as a schoolgirl's infatuation for a matinée-idol.

Now, however, alone with her cheval-glass in the black-and-gold bedroom, humour deserted her. " I'm crazy," she said to herself, " crazy to let myself go like this' crazy to think he wants anything of me except companionship."

Companionship ! What a word ! As though she, she of all women, needed a man's companionship !

Yet companionship—unless some miracle happened—unless, pride in hand, she begged him as she had never begged any man, for love—was all she might expect from Gerry.

" He's cold," she thought, " cold. Ice ! Even if I shewed him that I . . ."

But from that thought, all the Rawley pride in her, that same pride which was Hermione's, revolted. " Haven't I shewn him enough ? " she muttered. " Haven't I shewn him too much ? "

Anger, a strange sullen anger against those very qualities which had been his main attraction, took her by the jewelled throat. " The prig," she muttered ; " the useless prig."

Then the anger, recoiling like a snake, struck backwards. She began to revile not Cranston but herself. Was she, after all, so unattractive, such a sex-fool that she could not obtain the one and only man she had ever wanted ? Had she made herself too easy, too amiable, too—how the word hurt—cheap ?

Savagely, her blue eyes brimming, Angela Hemmingway turned from the lacquer-framed cheval-glass. Savagely, she began to pace up and down the Oriental bedroom. Savagely, she dabbed the lace handkerchief to her eyes. " Fool ! " she said to herself, " fool ! What does pride matter—what does anything matter except Gerry ? "

She came back to her mirror ; found another handkerchief ; rid her eyes of all tear-traces ; and went slowly down to her sitting-room. By the time that she heard his car at the door, and White, with that discreet domestic smile which, in a female household, announces the constant male visitor, ushered him in to her, the nerve-storm had almost passed. But the casualness of his greeting, his cool words, his unemotional hand-clasp, fretted her anew ; so that it was an effort to ask him, " And where do we go to-night, Gerry ? ", an annoyance to hear his calm, " Anywhere you like. I've no plans. What about the Savoy ? "

She detested the Savoy ; but could not trust herself to voice the detestation. It infuriated her to feel that he had made no special plans for her entertainment, that he should treat her as though she were less than some business-acquaintance. When he gave a dinner to his business-acquaintances, he at least took the trouble to order it beforehand.

" Well," he said, " what about making a start ? "

" I'm ready when you are." Somehow, she conquered her desire to sulk with him. " But hadn't you better telephone first ? It was rather crowded last time ; and you know I like a table by the window."

Telephoning, in the exiguous hall, Cranston's mind was on the matter of the bracelet. He had hesitated a little before putting the case into the pocket of his smoking-jacket ; wondered, vaguely, whether it wouldn't be better to post the trifle. Not having posted it, the thing would have to be given personally. When should he give it to her ? Then and there ? Over dinner ? Or after dinner ? " The sooner the better," he thought. " Now, before we go, would be best. I can't very well hand the thing across the dinner-table of a restaurant."

By the time he had finished his telephoning, however, Angela —still angry with a weird reasonless anger that frightened her by its vehemence—was already in the hall.

" If you keep me waiting another minute," said she, " I shall die of starvation."

The words sounded amiable enough ; and his obtuseness missed the tang of annoyance in them. Handing her—still ungloved, the lightest of wraps flung careless about her shoulders —into the car, his thoughts veered for a moment to Marankari. Would it be wise to let Ibbotsleigh into the secret ? With a fortune at stake, one couldn't be over-careful. . . . Once more, he felt himself on edge.

" Busy day ? " asked Angela, a little soothed by the

luxurious motion, as their car purred out of Clarges Street and into Piccadilly.

"Rather." With an effort, he dismissed Marankari.

"Why? The miners aren't really coming out, are they?"

"They may come out for a week or two." Gerry smiled—one of those grim smiles whose purport she could never fathom. Then the smile changed to a laugh as he thrust one hand into a pocket; and, withdrawing it to lay a little morocco-leather case on her lap, continued: "I bought this for you this afternoon."

"For me?"

"Yes. For you, Angela."

"But what is it?"

"Only a trifle."

The car went on a good fifty yards while Angela's ungloved fingers were still dallying with the catch of the jewel-case. Then, very slowly, wondering not so much what the gift might be, as what significance it might have, what sudden impulse in him had prompted the giving of it, she pressed home the catch; and as the beauty of the enamelled jewel leaped up at her from the white velvet whereon it lay, knew herself blushing like a girl. "He does care," she thought passionately, "he does care for me."

Gerry's car purred on; but she could find no words to thank him for his gift. She felt her eyes suffusing; felt, in every fibre of her, the certainty of his affection. Caring less, he would have bought hurriedly, tastelessly—not this, this perfect thing. It *was* perfect; and yet, even as he had said, a trifle, a trifle she need not scruple to accept.

At last, falteringly, she essayed speech. "Gerry, how thoughtful of you. How lovely. I—I can't ever thank you enough."

"Don't thank me, please. Just wear it." Cranston's words were curt. For suddenly, electrically, at sight of the blush mantling to her cheek, at sound of the words faltering on her lips, there had come on him, as an enemy in the night, the full recognition of his masculinity, of her womanhood. Suddenly, electrically, he had hungered for her. . .

"Just wear it," he repeated.

Angela, her heart pulsing at the emotion she guessed in him, made no answer. Still blushing, she picked the thin circlet from its velvet, and, holding it out to him in her right hand, extended her left arm with a gesture which spoke, more plainly than any words, the gratitude his words had forbidden. "Of course I'll wear it, Gerry," she whispered. "I'll wear it always, in memory—in memory of our friendship."

Now, taking the bracelet from her, taking it and clasping it, as she bade him, high on her cool white arm, it was Gerald Cranston who could find no words. The touch of his finger-tips on her delicate skin, the bitter-sweet perfume of her, her eyes upturned to his, the whole exquisite nearness of her maddened him as the thought of water maddens one who dies of thirst. The moisture parched on his lips. His lips ached for the scarlet of her mouth, for the mantling crimson of her cheeks.

As he slotted home the tiny chain which secured the clasp of the bracelet, she leaned closer to him ; so that, almost, her hair brushed his face. It was like fine gold, her hair ; and the forehead under it paler than palest ivory. He wanted the gold, the ivory and the scarlet of her ; wanted, with a terrible passionate wanting that burned up self-control as a fire burns stubble, to take her in his arms, to strain her and strain her to him till the want was satiate.

" Angela," he stammered, " Angela."

But Angela only smiled ; and smiling, withdrew. Watching her, he realized himself afraid ; afraid of his own passions.

So, with no word spoken clear between them, they came to the Savoy ; and there, once again, as she stepped down from the car, his finger-tips thrilled to the touch of her delicate skin once again, as they faced one another across the flower-decked dinner-table, the scarlet of her mouth was the scarlet of his desire.

That night, it seemed to him, she spoke hardly at all ; only smiled, tantalizingly, as a woman confident of her own powers : while every now and then, her eyes, avoiding yet holding his, glanced sideways and downwards at the jewelled circlet he had clasped on her arm. Once, too, it seemed to him as though, purposely, she brushed the circlet against her cheek.

But all through dinner, his eyes gave him no certainty of her. It was as though she moved, smiled, spoke, had her very being, behind a veil—behind that tenuous veil with which desire had blurred his vision. His vision was all blurred, a confusion. Strange passions, strange yearnings, swept him through and through. He knew the passions, the yearnings at their true worth, yet might not curb them. The reins of his self-control had snapped, snapped at the bit-rings. No longer might his brain dominate his body. His brain had loosed his body ; and his body, like a maddened horse, was stampeding, stampeding his brain.

All Cranston's yearnings, all his passions—though only the frosty fire which shewed in his eyes gave any outward hint of them—Angela Hemmingway knew. They were hers also, those yearnings, those passions, that startling desperate upsweep of

desire. But in her, the aptitudes controlled them : so that, even through the haze of her desire, she saw him clearly ; and seeing, smiled to think her battle almost won. " At last," she said to herself, " at last I've made him want me."

The foretaste of victory, of victory utter and overwhelming and, best of all, unexpected, was sweet in her mouth. " You win," repeated thought, " you win " ; and as they rose from their dinner, as he followed her out into the foyer, all the story of that winning, all her long caring for him, each and every hope and fear, each and every artifice which had helped fan the flames she sensed in him, flashed film-wise on the screen of recollection. " He's yours," said the aptitudes in her, " yours. Take him ! "

Yet now, suddenly, strangely, love—all that little love of which her nature was capable—forbade the aptitudes. In vain, experience convinced her of his passions ; convinced her that, whatever the day might bring, he was hers for the night. She did not want him thus, temporarily, for the gratification of a night. Love, insofar as love was in her, made her greedy of him, jealous of him. It seemed to her that she wanted him for all the nights ; wanted him against Hermione, against the world ; that she wanted him altogether hers—not as Lionel had been hers, or her other husband, but permanently, as her own one man.

And on that thought, her mood changed, and her face with her mood. So that, to Cranston, watching her while she sipped her coffee, it seemed as though the veil of his passions parted from before his eyes ; as though the vision he had had of her ever since that moment in the car when desire for her near womanhood had burned up his self-control as fire burns stubble, dissolved into an older, happier picture ; as though, once again, she were the Angela of his yesterday, the companion to whom, out of mere thankfulness for her companionship, he had planned to give that bracelet which sparkled dark against the white of her arm. And looking on that happier picture, it seemed to him that his brain, once more resolute, dominated the madness of his body.

But that seeming, too, was a madness ; as he knew all too well when, their evening ended, he stood with her, Havers watching them, on the doorstep of her tiny home ; and she, imagining victory certain, imagining herself weaponed for all time against that armour of self-control which had so long defeated her shafts, girt on her own armour, saying, as her hand rested lightly in his, " Good-night, Gerry. You'll forgive me—won't you ?—if I don't invite you to come in."

§ 2

He felt, driving home through the summer night, that he could never forgive her; never forgive himself for the weakness which had not made her his. He wanted her. God, how he wanted her! Her voice, still ringing in his ears, mocked his power. Her fingers, the touch of them still lingering cool against his palm, mocked his manhood. He wanted her! The picture of her, standing gold-haired and bare-armed and infinitely desirable in the narrow doorway of that house she had denied him, was a thrilling frenzy. He wanted her, wanted her as he had never dreamed to want any woman. And he would make her his. Yes, by God, he would make her his. Why not? With all men, woman was a necessity; and with him, to desire was to acquire. . .

On that, he went to bed. But in bed was no rest. Sleepless, he visualized two women—the one tall and delicate in her dignified appeal; the other of gold and ivory, with scarlet lips, headily sensuous, tantalizing, her every withdrawal a temptation.

"I am that one thing," said those scarlet lips, "which, desiring, you may not acquire."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

§ 1

MORNING came; and with morning, a renewal of Cranston's self-control. Rennie, tapping punctual with the tea, found his master clear-eyed, clear-thoughted, ready as ever for the business of the day. No Angela, swore that master while he tubbed and shaved and breakfasted, should turn *him* from his business, no passion flaw the girders in his edifice of success. Let other, lesser men yield themselves to women. For him—Cranston's, Marankari, the power which was money and the money which was power!

But self-control weakened at the first sight of Angela's handwriting, large and legible on the blue envelope which topped his morning mail. Opening that envelope, he was conscious of excitement, of a thrill which drove business from his mind. What had she written? Why had she written?

"My dear," she wrote. "Was I horrid not to let you come in? If so, forgive me. You always have come in, haven't you? There's no harm in that. And there's no harm in my writing to you, is there? I must write you! I can't go to bed without thanking you again and again—you don't know how I did thank you, all our evening—not for your gift, but for the thought which prompted you to give it me. It is on my arm now. It will be on my arm all night. Perhaps I oughtn't to tell you that—perhaps I oughtn't to admit how much your friendship means to me. I wouldn't, if you were any other man. Any more than I would admit why I didn't let you come in last night. I didn't dare to, Gerry. Do you understand?"

Reading that unsigned, undated letter, the frosty fire kindled in Cranston's eyes. Turning over the single sheet of scented paper, perusing the postscript, "If you do understand—telephone —I shall be in all day", his capable hands shook as with ague. So Angela was his—his for the taking!

For a long while, triumphant at the desk which had witnessed

so many triumphs, he sat thoughtless. Angela was his—his for the taking. The very walls of his sanctum seemed to be shouting the certainty of her. . . . Then, abruptly, thought returned to him ; and with thought, his especial fear.

Subconsciously—his imagination projecting itself into the future—he felt himself caught, entangled, a bird in a net. Consciously, his instinct was to fly the net, to escape temptation. For Angela *was* temptation—temptation embodied and made living. Yielding to her, telephoning to her, he would jeopardize the very principle of his career.

He put her note away in his pocket, and turned to the rest of his correspondence. But, once more, concentration failed him. The perfume of the note haunted his nostrils, the words of it haunted his mind. " If you do understand—telephone." As though he would not understand ! As though she had not intended he should understand !

" The car's here, sir," said Rennie, knocking as he entered.

" Let it wait," said Gerald Cranston—for now, a new thought, a new fear, had come to his mind. He took Angela's letter from his pocket, read it again. Yes ! Angela had meant that he should understand ; had meant—and for how long ?—to entrap him. Angela was dangerous—dangerous. She was like those other, earlier women—the casuals of the days before his marriage. And besides, Angela, slight though the relationship might be, was a Rawley. Secretly, perhaps, she might be laughing at him—as that other Rawley must have laughed when she trapped him into marrying. " Put Angela away," said the fear in him, " put her away as you put away that other Rawley."

Yet how could he put Angela away, how so answer her letter as to escape the trap ?

§ 2

For ten minutes—carefully as though it had been some legal correspondence—Cranston's brain sought an answer to Angela's letter : till at last, fear goading imagination, it seemed to him as though, since he could not exile her as he had exiled Hermione, he must exile . . . himself.

Then and there, deliberately, kindling a match, he burned the perfumed note to ashes. There and then, impulsively, eager to burn his boats as he had burnt her letter, he rang for his Scotsman ; told him, curtly, " I propose leaving Town. Possibly to-night."

".For how long, sir?" Rennie's interruption betrayed Rennie's astonishment.

"I'm not certain. But it won't be for less than a week."

"And what luggage will you require, sir? The motor-trunks?"

"Probably. But I'm not certain of that, either. Tillotson will telephone you full instructions from the office. Meanwhile, you're not to go out. Do you understand?"

"Pairfectly, sir."

The Scotsman, wondering what might be in the wind, withdrew; and Cranston, watching the door close behind him, turned back to his desk. For a moment, he regretted the hastiness of his decision. For a moment, looking at the ashes on the hearth, he pitied himself, almost pitied Angela. Need he, after all, break things off so abruptly? Couldn't he compromise, temporize with the situation? Wouldn't it be a little weak of him —more than weak, foolish—to run away?

But at that, fear goaded him again, saying, "You can't compromise. Not now. The thing's gone too far"; and yielding to the goad, he unlocked the drawer of his desk; added the over-night's accumulation of papers to his morning mail; stuffed the lot into an attaché-case, and was into the waiting car before Havers could open the door for him.

All the way down to the City, his mind, dismissing private problems, functioned with its old machine-like regularity. To take a week off, would mean getting through a week's work in a day. If the miners insisted on coming out, he would have to hurry back. Damn the miners! That meant not going too far from London. . . . Oh, well—so long as he got away, it didn't much matter where to. That decision must wait till he had seen all taut on the business ship; given his officers their instructions.

From his new coal-distribution office in Copthall Avenue, having spent a purposeful hour with Sandeman, astonished as Rennie at his unexpected departure, he drove to his stockbrokers; from his stockbrokers to the Bank; and from the Bank to Pinner's Court, where, summoning Tillotson and Parker, both petrified at the unusual lateness of his arrival, he called for the list of his appointments; saw that Sir James Guthrie had booked one for ten forty-five the following morning; decided that he must see Guthrie; gave Parker orders to cancel or postpone all the others; had a clerk telephone Rennie that he would not be leaving Town that night, and started in to dictate the copious letters, instructions and memoranda which his "week's holiday" (as he phrased it to Tillotson) necessitated.

"And to which address, sir," asked Tillotson, the dictation finished and the main pieces of the business jig-saw puzzle fitted accurately to their places, "are we to communicate with you? Shanklin or Studley?"

"Neither." Cranston's voice rasped. The chance reference to Hermione had flicked him on the raw; and as his secretary, having reminded him of a promise to lunch with Maurice Elvery at the City Carlton, limped away, he barked across the sanctum, "I'll tell you my address later. Meanwhile, get those things through by three o'clock."

§ 3

It was over his luncheon with the dapper little produce-broker, or rather over the cigars which followed luncheon, that the destination of Cranston's "holiday" decided itself.

"Going to take a week off, eh?" said Maurice Elvery, leaning back in his saddlebag chair to puff a languid smoke-ring. "Good for you. Where's it to be?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet." Cranston, who had sat out the meal with some impatience, drained his coffee at a gulp. "Holidays aren't much in my line of country."

"Well, if I were you," Elvery winked through his monocle, "and if I were going alone, I'd make it Paris. A pal and I were over there the other day. We stayed at the Meurice, and I must say they did us like fighting-cocks."

"Really." Cranston, suddenly interested, began to draw his host out; and Elvery continued to talk Paris for a full ten minutes. "It's altered since the war, of course," said Elvery, "but, in my opinion, less than London. The passport-business is a bit of a nuisance; but I can put you on to a pal of mine at the F.O. who'll get that through quick enough. By the way, we came back by air—Sammy Instone's line—just for the fun of the thing."

Walking back to his office, Cranston perpended his produce-broker's suggestion. A trip to Paris had its advantages. With Hermione at the Fotheringay's, it would certainly look queer if one took a week's holiday anywhere else in England.

Back at Pinner's Court, he clinched the already half-formed decision; and, summoning Tillotson—as with valet so with secretary, Cranston's instinct that day was all for boat-burning—told him to get Elvery on the wire and find out the name of his friend at the Foreign Office.

"Tell Mr. Elvery," said Cranston, "that I'll take it as a

personal favour if he'll help you to get the thing through by to-morrow morning. And if it's all right about the passport, find out how the trains go. Don't forget, please, that I've got that appointment with Sir James."

Tillotson hurried off; and Tillotson's master returned to his business jig-saw. The cable to Ibbotsleigh was still as he had scribbled it over-night. He started in to re-draft it; carefully; changing a word here; deleting a word there; adding, for final instruction, "My participation in Syndicate strictly private. Please keep confidential"; and signing the message with his own name.

By the time he was through with the cable, Tillotson limped back.

"I've fixed up about the passport, sir," said Tillotson. "If you can manage to be photographed some time this afternoon, we can have it by eleven o'clock to-morrow. But I'm afraid there's going to be a difficulty about the trains. The only decent one is at eleven-thirty; and you'll hardly have time to get through with Sir James before eleven-fifteen."

"Isn't there one in the afternoon?" Cranston frowned.

"Not a good one, sir."

"Why not?" Cranston—disliking the idea of two more nights in London, and of the extra falsehood which the extra delay would entail in his inevitable prevarications with Angela—frowned again. Then, while his secretary explained that the cross-Channel services had been curtailed as a precaution against the threatened coal-stoppage, the latter part of Maurice Elvery's conversation began to intrigue his memory. "All right," he interrupted. "Never mind about the trains. I'll go by air."

"By air, sir?"

"Precisely. By air." Tillotson's employer fidgeted with the paper-knife on his desk. "There's sure to be some 'plane starting later than eleven-thirty. Ring up the Instone people and find out, will you? If there isn't—or if the 'plane's booked up—get on to Sir Samuel himself and ask him if he'll let me have a special. You'd better ask for Sir Samuel, anyway: it'll give you the opportunity of explaining why I can't go to that meeting to-morrow."

Tillotson limped off again; to return in less than ten minutes with the news that Sir Samuel was out of Town, that the mail 'plane left at twelve-thirty, and that, "Mr. Theodore will tell his people to hold it ten minutes if you happen to be late."

"Good." Cranston's frown relaxed.

"And Mr. Theodore Instone," went on the secretary, "wants

to know if you would like them to fetch you in one of their cars, or if you'd prefer to go down to Croydon in your own. He says the luggage allowance is thirty pounds per passenger ; but you can take up to eighty if you pay for it."

"Good again." Cranston, always pleased at efficiency, permitted himself the first smile of the day. But the smile vanished, and his lips set to their sternest implacability, as—still driven by that same impulse to burn his boats—he ordered Tillotson to switch him on to the exchange and see that no-one disturbed him till he rang his private bell.

"The sooner I get this job done, the better," he thought grimly.

Nevertheless—even while his brain recalled Angela's number—Cranston's hand hesitated to lift the telephone-receiver. So far, his every action since leaving Aldford Street had been automatic, instinctive as some wild animal's flight from fire. Now, however, his fears stilled by action, he began to reason with himself.

His decision to break off their friendship was still steely—steely as any decision he had ever made in business. Nothing she might say to him, no reason he himself could adduce, would avail to alter the plans he had made for leaving London. And yet, for all its steeliness, he could not help but regret that decision ; could not help realizing a little of his own cowardice. It seemed strange to think of himself, of Gerald Cranston, running away from a woman ; being unkind to her, lying to her, hurting her. The thing had to be done, though—however unkind, however hurtful. One couldn't temporize with the passions. One must either up-root them—or be oneself up-rooted. Besides, wasn't it his duty ? Wasn't he bound to save her, to save their friendship, the friendship which had been so precious to both of them, from ending in . . . in the only other way it could end, in the passionate way his own desires had urged and her letter laid open ?

That last thought braced him anew to action. Resolutely, lifting the receiver, he asked for her number. The clerk buzzed the engaged signal at him ; and, swearing under his breath, he asked for the supervisor. Immediately afterwards, he was through, listening to Angela's, "Yes. Yes. This is Mayfair double-seven six four. Who's that ? Who wants me ?" ; answering her with his usual business-like, "Cranston—Gerald Cranston speaking."

"Oh, it's you, Gerry. You at last ! Thank goodness ! I've been waiting in for you all day. I thought you'd telephone hours ago. Why didn't you ? Not that it matters. Tell

me—where are you telephoning from? The office? Tell me—did you get my letter? The one I wrote you last night."

"Yes. I got your letter." The undercurrent of excitement in her words shocked him; yet strengthened his determination to make an end with her. He realized, suddenly imaginative, by how much her passion transcended his own. "I got it this morning."

"And"—the wire carried the sentence so clearly that he could hear every intonation in it—"and did you like my letter, Gerry? Did you—did you understand it?"

"I think so." He did his best to keep the curtness out of his voice.

"And you're not angry with me—for last night?"

"No."

"Then"—almost, the thrill of the thing she said broke his determination—"I'm going to see you again? Soon? To-night, perhaps?"

"Not to-night, I'm afraid." He had to force the first lie. "I shall be busy to-night."

"To-morrow, then?" Perceptibly, her tone changed; and he sensed disappointment in it. . . "Get the job done," said the fear in him. "Get it done swiftly."

"I'm afraid I can't manage to-morrow, either." The second lie came easily enough. "The fact is, when I got home last night, I found a cable. A most important cable. From Paris. It means that I'll have to leave London to-morrow morning."

"For how long?" There was vehemence behind Angela's question.

"I'm not sure. Probably for a week."

"And you're too busy to see me to-night?"

"I'm afraid so." Cranston managed a laugh. "But I'll ring you up as soon as ever I get back. And we'll dine somewhere. The Savoy again, if you like."

"Gerry!" The anger of her interruption struck the laugh from his lips. "Gerry! Do you realize what you're saying, what you're doing? Do you realize——"

The wire went dumb; and for a moment, he thought that she had cut him off. When she next spoke, there was no anger in her voice, no vehemence; only pain. "Gerry," she said. "Gerry! Don't treat me like this. I can't bear it. If—if my silly letter annoyed you, let's forget about it. If—if you really must go to Paris, I—I won't complain. Only—let me see you to-night—just for a minute—just for half-an-hour."

Once more the wire went dumb. Then, pleadingly, it carried

her last question: "Gerry, you won't leave me without saying goodbye, will you?"

But at that, fear goading him for the last cruelty, Gerald Cranston's lips drew to a tense scarlet line above his white teeth. "I'm sorry, Angela," he said, "but this *is* goodbye."

§ 4

Thirty seconds later, Cranston, hanging up the telephone-receiver, told himself that the thing was settled, that he had coped for good and all with Angela's menace to his efficiency. A minute later, ringing for Tillotson to take down his cable to Marankari, he had dismissed her from his conscious mind.

Yet, subconsciously, all through that strenuous afternoon, the cry in her voice—the little cry, half angry human and half hurt animal, which had answered his cruelty—remained with him; haunted him. And when—his jig-saw finished to the last piece—he made his way back from the City to face the long lonely evening at Aldford Street, it took all his self-control not to reverse decision, not to lift the speaking-tube and order Havers, "Mrs. Hemmingway's!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

§ 1

NEXT morning, it seemed to Cranston as though the haunt of Angela were laid. Dumb-belling, shaving, tubbing, breakfasting, questioning Rennie about the contents of his suit-cases, dictating rapid-fire final instructions to Tillotson, who arrived punctually at half-past eight in Aldford Street ; driving Tillotson Citywards from Aldford Street, he vouchsafed her never a thought. Sir James Guthrie, presenting himself ten minutes late at Pinner's Court, found his client no less grimly unruffled in demeanour, no less purposefully meticulous in figuring than usual. "Take your time, Sir James," said that client, "I'd like this Excess Profits Duty calculation settled before I start my holiday."

They got the calculation settled by twenty-five minutes to twelve ; and at twenty to—Sir James having made his pompous exit—Parker came in carrying the completed passport and a slip of pale-blue paper with the Instone House flag stamped in darker blue on its right-hand top corner. "By the way, sir," said Parker, handing these over, "last night after you'd gone, a telephone-call came through for you. I couldn't quite catch the name, but apparently the gentleman—— "

"Well, it's no good bothering me about that now." Cranston, putting the ticket and passport in the pocket of his tweed dust-coat, glanced at the clock. "If the chap rings up again, find out his business ; and if it sounds worth while, tell him I'll be back in a week. Nothing come in while I've been with Sir James, I presume ? "

"No, sir, nothing."

"Right. Then I'll be off."

Putting on his travelling-cap, leaving the office, stepping into his car, telling Havers, "Croydon Aerodrome, and you'll have to look sharp", Cranston's primary sensation was pleasure. For the first time in ten months, he felt that he could dismiss all business-matters from his mind. "After all," he said to himself, "one needs an occasional holiday : it helps one's efficiency " ; and so

saying, began to wonder, while the Siddeley shot fast along the Embankment for Chelsea Bridge, what he should do with himself in Paris.

Then, Chelsea Bridge passed, his mind, as though resentful of such trivial employment, fell to considering the long postponed question of his relations with his wife. In three weeks, *her* holidays would be over; and, willy nilly, they would have to resume some form of joint existence in Aldford Street. Rather a difficult existence! Still—it would have one compensation, Arthur. Curiously, he began to visualize Arthur, his bonny smile, his trustful eyes. But Hermione, he would not let himself visualize. Nor Angela. He was done with women—done with them for good and all. Women were only a complication, an artificial unnecessary complication in the lives of successful men.

The successful man's car spun on, beyond the river, through the desert of suburban shops, across the railed green of Clapham Common. The successful man, emerging from meditation, looked at the sky. A stiff breeze was blowing. He could feel the force of it through the open car-windows; see it scudding the white clouds high across the blue. He examined his watch; told Havers to "look sharp."

The sensation of pleasure changed to a sensation of relief. Holidays apart, he was doing the right thing, cutting loose from the artificial complications. . . But presently, as, leaving the Common behind them, they came out of shopland into villa-land, he forgot, in expectation of his actual journey, the purpose which had driven him to undertake it. Air-travel—he had flown more than once during the war—ought to be distinctly enjoyable. Profitable, too—once people like the Instones had done the pioneer-work. After all, time *was* money: and one saved nearly four hours of it on the journey to Paris alone. Later on, when the services extended—to Rome, say, or Lisbon—the advantages would be enormous. Pity, though, that the aerodrome should be such a long way from the centre of things.

By now, they were out of villa-land—switchbacking along a more or less open road. Cranston, again examining his watch, saw that its hands already pointed twenty minutes past twelve. He asked Havers how much further they had to go. Havers called back, "We're nearly there, sir."

In five minutes they came to a railway-bridge; and in three more, crossing it, to the big white sign-board of the 'drome. The car veered down a narrow road; and Cranston, gathering up his stick and gloves, saw, on his right, the big empty arches of some

newly-constructed hangars. Then Havers unclutched; swung his steering-wheel sharp left; and so arrived, through unpretentious gates, along a concrete roadway, past a little wooden hotel and the various war-time-looking huts of the various air-lines, at the Instone office. "Just on time, I think, sir," said Havers, glancing at the clock on his dashboard, as Cranston stepped out.

A young ground-officer in the white sea-cap and dark blue uniform of the Instone service, who had obviously been awaiting the passenger's arrival, saluted; asked Cranston's name; whispered to a subordinate, "Tell 'em he's here"; signalled a porter for the suit-cases; and—Cranston having given the interested chauffeur his final instructions—led him past the office into the wood-walled concrete-floored Customs hut.

The suit-cases were already on the bench. "Chalk 'em up quick, Evans," said the Instone man to the Customs-official; and to the porter, the chalking done, "Take 'em aboard, while I get Mr. Cranston through C.I.D."

He led to the left; and Cranston followed into a narrow wooden corridor, where a second official, in a bowler hat, rose from a plain wooden table to examine his passport.

"We don't waste much time, you'll observe," commented the ground-officer, guiding him back through the Custom-house and out into the open aerodrome.

"Apparently not."

Cranston, interested as a traveller newly-arrived at some foreign railway-station, had halted for a moment to survey the scene. Fifty yards ahead of him, he saw the big Vickers-Vimy biplane with the long narrow cabin underslung between its yellow wings and the "G.E.A.R." painted in prominent white letters all over its blue fuselage. Mechanics stood at its lower wing-tips. High and forward, where the two leather caps of pilot and observer just shewed in silhouette above the triplex-glass wind-screen, another mechanic was twirling at the stiff propeller. On his left, rose the repairing hangars; on his right, the small concrete landing-lighthouse. The air-cone was flying: its tip pointed rigid, and almost due East. Overhead, the clouds scudding above her, a loud monoplane was just nosing for the wide stretch of flat green earth.

"That's the Amsterdam Fokker," said the ground-officer. "She'll have had a rough trip."

As he spoke, the mechanic loosed the single tractor screw of the Vickers-Vimy; and the sixteen cylinders of the four-hundred-and-fifty Napier Lion engine ceased their intermittent phutting.

"You'd best be getting aboard," continued the Instone man; and added, through the rising roar, as they made their way towards the 'plane, "We've only got one other passenger to-day."

Its narrow doorway gave little view of the cabin's interior; and Cranston, turning, one foot at the bottom rung of the exiguous steel gangway, to thank his guide, gave his fellow-passenger never a thought. Only after he had climbed aboard, only after the gangway was down and the door sliding home, did recognition come to him: only as the door closed, and, astonishment holding him to his feet, he saw, through the long windows, a mechanic draw the triangular block from the starboard wheel and the ground commence to move, did he fully know himself alone, alone in that narrow air-cabin, with . . . Angela Hemmingway.

§ 2

Angela was sitting—her body tensed in its fur travelling-coat, her gloved hands tensed at her lap—on the big double wicker-seat which curved full-width across the after end of the cabin. Her right shoulder was huddled against the starboard wall. A heavy veil covered her face; but through the veil, Cranston could see her eyes. He turned away from her eyes. . . .

The 'plane veered to port; began to taxi. He saw the mechanics disappear from its wing-tips; heard the engine-roar deepen; watched the hand of the little compass-like air-speed indicator set high on the forward wall above the "Notices to Passengers" crawl from twenty to thirty, from thirty to forty; watched the water jerk in its racked water-bottle. . . .

Angela called to him, tremulously, "Gerry—sit down—you're making me nervous."

He turned; grasped the wicker back of an empty seat; faced her, still standing. The cabin seemed to turn with him. Their ground-speed increased as they faced the wind. The big 'plane bumped on its wheels as a life-boat bumps at the launching. Behind him, the indicator-needle touched fifty-five—sixty—sixty-eight. Either side of him, the green of the 'drome swirled to waves of colourless dun. Then, as the bumping ceased, he knew that their wheels had left ground. . . .

Angela called to him again, "Gerry! Please sit down. I'm frightened. Once we're in the air——" He called back to her, tuning his voice to the engine-roar, "There's nothing to be frightened of. We're in the air now." But astonishment—he had remembered, suddenly, a casual conversation during

which she had confessed that nothing would tempt her to brave a flight—still held him to his feet.

At his words, speech, thought, memory had gone from Angela Hemmingway. Her mind refused its office. She could recollect no single incident of the past four-and-twenty hours. All that experience, from the moment when, raging desperately up and down her Chinese sitting-room, she had definitely cast away pride, deciding, if only White could find out his route, to use her neglected passport and accompany Gerry to Paris, became a mad blur of sensation. She remembered only her fears—her fears of the air; her fears of Gerry's anger. . . .

The fears were still on her, blinding her, deafening her. She could scarcely realize that this tall man in the tweed overcoat and tweed travelling-cap, whose face stared down implacable and unreadable within a few feet of her own, was actually Gerry; that she was actually alone with him, alone in this arched white corridor of an air-cabin with the burning blue slits of open sky either side its windows and the green ground falling away below. The loud roaring of the propeller, the louder roar of the engine, the little creaks of the swaying fuselage, hardly penetrated to her ears. Herself, Gerry, the cabin, the very 'plane seemed things of no volition. Yet always the ground fell away from them; always she knew that the earth dropped and dropped; that if she only dared peer down through the burning blue, she might watch its dropping.

The Vickers-Vimy banked from the wind; and involuntarily, as the port wing lifted, her eyes shut out the sight of it. Involuntarily, the hands on her lap unclasped, clutching for support. Then she heard Gerry's voice, quietly purposeful, "Sit still; there's nothing to worry about"; opened her eyes; looked into his.

She had never seen this Gerry—the officer-Gerry who, himself fearless, had inspired panicked men to the last heroism of conquered fear; never seen the confident fire flash in his pupils; never heard the confident note ring under his quiet voice. "Sit still," he repeated, his eyes holding hers. "There's no danger."

The 'plane levelled itself down-wind; and Gerry took off his overcoat. "It's jolly hot in here," he said.

The simple action, the simple words, calmed her—as Cranston had intended they should calm. It seemed impossible, watching this man as he took a step towards her, that she should ever have been afraid of him; should ever have contemplated—as she had contemplated all through that last nightmare of a wakeful night—this safe vehicle of the air crashing them headlong to their deaths.

Still talking, simply of simple things, he sat him down beside her. And the nearness of him, the touch of his right shoulder against hers, comforted her still more. Till suddenly, suddenly as it had come in, the fear of death went out of her. How ridiculous it had been to think of death, of danger—up here in the sun-blazing blue, with the white clouds sweeping past and all the glory of the open skies for their delight! How glad she was, how unutterably and immeasurably glad that she had let neither pride nor fear stand in her way, but thrown aside, in one fine gesture, all that absurd cloaking of the conventions with which, but a night and a night before, she had hidden her love for him.

He bade her look back on London; and she looked back on London, fearlessly, seeing it already a toy village, tiny under its smoke-cloud, its river winding like a silver eel. He bade her lift her veil, take off her furs; and she obeyed him fearlessly as a child its teacher. Even when the 'plane struck its first air-pocket, and—the di-hedral angle of the great wings altering automatically to stability—it seemed to her as though the cabin's floor dropped from under her feet and her heart dropped after it, she experienced no fear, only exhilaration, an exhilaration that took her by the throat.

Cranston, knowing his purpose accomplished, fell silent. She could see that he was angry with her, doubtful of himself. doubtful of his duty. But neither his silence nor his anger checked her exhilaration of the air, her joy of being alone with him.

They *were* alone, utterly alone, isolated from the world in this safe air-chariot, slung between those firm unmoving wings whose blue struts and blue petrol-tanks shewed steady as temple-pillars against the clouds on either side of her. Yes—at last they were alone, isolated from their kind, isolated even from that leather-capped pilot-boy who sat side-by-side with his observer above and beyond the little six-inch window of the forward cabin-wall.

They struck another air-pocket, and again she experienced that strange exhilaration. The tenseness which had huddled her against the starboard wall ebbed, as swift waters ebb, from her body. Colour flooded back to her face. Upright she sat—her lips half-parted, her eyes revelling and dancing in the sunlight that danced against their windows. And Cranston watched her; watched as a man who, knowing desire, is yet fearful to seize it.

To neither of them came any sense, any sensation of speed. In that narrow cabin, neither time moved nor space: only the indicator-needle moved, the click of it silenced by the clack and beat of the screw; moved from ninety to a hundred, from a hundred to a hundred-and-five.

But below them, five thousand feet below, so tiny that Epsom Grand Stand might have been a keeper's hut, the very land they knew was moving, sliding like a patterned carpet under their lofted wheels. Over that carpet, over those rabbit-runs which were gardens, over those rabbit-hutches which were homes of men, their winged shadow slid level with them ; while above them and on either side of them, slowly as giant sail-ships, now sun-tinged and now sun-dimmed, snow-whites and snow-grays and snow-greens and snow-lilacs, the great clouds moved to meet them across the sapphire of the upper air.

§ 3

The Vickers-Vimy sailed on, down-wind for the sea ; and still Cranston spoke never a word, only watched, watched as a man fearful of his own desires, the face of the woman beside him.

He had been angry with her, angry at the trick she had somehow played him ; angry with himself because, in that moment before their wheels lifted from earth, astonishment had reft him of self-control. But now there was no anger, no astonishment in him. He was conscious only of desire, of a great desire to take her to him and hold her in his arms as they flew.

Her shoulder, stirring against his, set strange thoughts stirring in his mind. His mind raced, raced to the old thrill, to the thrill of the battle-years, when he had been man and not money-grubber. In his ears, the roar of their propeller was as the roaring of many guns. They had been good days, the gun-days, the battle-days. He had not feared them. All his life, he had feared but one thing—this thing called passion.

Yet why should he fear passion, why dread the impulse which urged him to take Angela in his arms ? Life was so short, so dangerous. At any moment, here in the air, there on earth, a man might die. Why, then, should he who had never feared death, be fearful of life, of the very force which was life's essence ?

For a while, Cranston's mind ceased its racing. For a while, deliberating with himself, he put away desire. He had been tricked—tricked. He must not yield to Angela. Once they touched earth, he must send Angela home, back to London.

Home ! Back to London ! Why should he send Angela home, back to London ? Angela was his—his ! Once more, her shoulder stirred against him ; once more, watching her, his mind raced to the thrill of the older years. What if this woman had played him a trick—since the life-force in him wanted her—since the trick had surrendered her to his life-force !

Already, the life-force in him had made her half his. Already, his eyes, his voice, his touch had grappled the panic in her, grappled her soul free from that fear of the air she had once confessed to him. Was he not her master? Had he not conquered her fear? Could he not, then, conquer his own?

And momentarily, knowing his fear, he knew it conquered. Angela had surrendered herself his—his for the taking. If he refrained from her—for even yet it was not plain to him whether he should take her or no—it would not be because he dreaded passion, not because he dreaded woman. He, Gerald Cranston, dreaded no woman. Momentarily, he was free of all dreads, free as the rushing air.

Turning from her, he slid back the Triplex glass window, and drew a breath of that rushing air deep into his lungs. The air was heady as wine. Peering down through the rush of it, he could see all Kent a-shimmer below—here a river, its scimitar damascened in winking steel about the emerald fields; there, crawling along rails straight and thin as bayonet edges, the cotton-wool smoke-cloud of a baby's train; here, a tiny hop-garden and there a tinier oast-house; here a gray line of roadway and there a red patch of village.

All Kent was tiny, a map lit for his silent reading by the zenith-touching sun. And Angela, turning from the sun, watched him while he read it.

She had no wish that he should look back on her, speak with her. Momentarily, his presence, the slight touch of his averted shoulder, sufficed her need. For now, now her every aptitude was clamorous with the certainty of him.

So, speechless, they raised Lympne 'drome; and saw, beyond Lympne 'drome, the coast, two dark lines that opened out, far and far ahead, from either side their forward windows. Faster the dark lines opened, and faster; till soon the coast was as a wall, as some great indented wall bastioning the flats of the Channel; till soon, they could guess the green lichen of the grass-land carpeting the wall-top, and, below the wall-top, sable-brown in shadow, blinding-white in sun, the cliff-bastions falling sheer to the foam-line of the sea.

And the sea-sight, the sea-guess, thrilled them both. Speechless still, they looked into one another's eyes; read the thoughts in each other's eyes, the thoughts which said clearer than any speech, "I am yours—yours. Take me!"

But that taking was not yet to be. Over Lympne, a gloved hand stretched back to tap on the little pilot's window set high in the far cabin-wall; and Cranston, rising to his feet as the

window opened, made his way forward between the empty seats. The gloved hand reached him a note. The window closed. Reading that note, he could hear the pilot reeling in his telephone aerial. Re-reading it, his brow knit. Angela broke silence, calling to him: "Is anything the matter?" He called back to her: "Nothing serious. We're going up a bit—that's all."

"Why?"

"To clear the clouds."

The easy half-truth satisfied her ignorance; and, putting the note in his pocket, he felt that he had done wisely in not telling her that Lympne had warned them "Storm off French coast"; that they were zooming to clear the worst of it.

They were zooming steep. He could hardly hold himself upright. Looking down, he saw the oval of Lympne 'drome dwindle till its landing-circle contracted to a mere white dot, and its great hangars, with their dark roofs and their bright archways, looked tiny and solid as the batteries of an Ever-ready torch. Looking up, he could see clouds massing.

Steadying himself by the seat-backs, he made his way aft to Angela; resumed his place at her side. The 'plane was still rising. Already, he judged their height at seven thousand.

Lympne had disappeared. Almost under them, Folkestone perched like a toy village on the bastion-wall of the Channel. And now Angela saw, beyond and below the thin ribbon of green which edged Folkestone village, the thick white ribbon of the coastward sea. Nearer that ribbon slid, and nearer. Presently, looking beyond it, she saw the whole sea-pageant opening out like a giant's fan below.

Over that fan, over that pageant, sunshine and cloud-shadow played as limelight on some immense mirror—now hiding the white bevels of the sea-board, now revealing the silver patches to mid-Channel, flickering hither on specklets she knew for sail-boats, flickering yon on wisplets, as of cotton-wool, which she knew for the smoke-plumes of toy steamships crawling far across the sea. . . .

But Cranston's eyes were not upon the sea.

§ 4

Once more, a moment and a moment ere they leaped the coast, a gloved hand tapped on the Triplex. Once more, making his way forward, Cranston took their pilot's message. "Close all windows," he read, "and sit tight. Tell lady, no danger."

He made his way back to her; slid the glasses home; told her

to brace her feet against the steel foot-rests. Again she asked him, "Why?" Again the half-truth, "We're turning into the wind," satisfied her ignorance.

The great 'plane staggered once as the cliffs fled under, staggered again as they headed to the south. Eyes on the indicator, Cranston saw their air-speed touch a hundred and ten. The 'plane staggered a third time, staggered and corkscrewed in the rush of the gale. She asked him, not fearfully but as one who has the right to know: "Gerry, are we in danger?" He answered her, a laugh in his eyes: "No—we're in no danger. Sit easy; but brace your feet."

Bracing her feet, she felt his right arm go round her shoulders. "It'll steady you," he said. "You don't mind?"

"No. I don't mind."

"Are you a good sailor?" The laugh was on his lips now.

"Splendid." She, too, laughed. "And you?"

"Good enough."

The 'plane staggered a fourth time; rolled; pitched. Looking forward, Cranston saw the clouds slide away from their port wing-tip. High to starboard, its motes blinding him through the glass, the sun touched zenith. Then, slowly, he guessed the sun-motes fading; guessed, instantly weather-wise, the buffeting to come. . . .

And in that moment, he knew fear—fear selfless yet physical—fear not for himself but for the woman at his side. The fear struck like a knife-thrust, piercing the chain-mail of his self-control; and instinctively, to the pain of it, his arm tightened round Angela's shoulders; instinctively, he drew her to him, folding her body against the coming of the storm. "My dear," he whispered, "my dear."

He did not kiss her; and she did not wish that they should yet kiss. It was enough to know him hers, to feel his heart throbbing against her breasts as he drew her to him, to feel her own heart throbbing against his.

The first fear-pang passed; and he loosed her a little. In her, as yet, was no fear; only a great contentment. Her right hand sought his left, fondled it. She snuggled against him, as a child snuggles, happy, passionless.

The 'plane steadied itself; flew on, even-keeled in the sun. But now, fear-loosed, imagination had its way with Gerald Cranston. Imaginatively, eight thousand feet below him, he saw the sea. And the sea was angry. Clouds, lightning-lit, veiled and blurred the mirror of it. Black clouds, rearing like

stallions, came stamping and pawing across the mirror of the sea. . . .

He controlled imagination; looked out, over Angela's head, into the eye of the sun.

Looking, his fear for her stabbed him again. . . . The sun's eye was dimming, dimming. Its rays no longer blinded him. He saw it clear—a great ball of yellow fire hung lantern-wise between the dark arches of the clouds. The cloud-arches were racing—racing down on them from the yellow lantern of the sun.

Flashingly, he was aware of the yellow sun-lantern reddening to the onrush of the cloud-arches; of the cloud-arches wiping out the sun-lantern; of the dark arches rising, castle-wise, tier upon tier, rising and fuming till their smoky battlements blocked the sky. Then, as the giant 'plane rocked, rocked and recovered to the first of the storm, he was aware only of Angela.

Angela had lifted her head from his breast. The exquisite perfume of her filled his nostrils. Her face, her little exquisite face, was upturned to his. Her fingers—her little exquisite gloveless fingers—were still fondling his hand. He could feel her body, her whole little exquisite body, pressing, thrilling against his arm. Her red lips were whispering, whispering to him: "Gerry—Gerry, I love you. Hold me. Hold me close. Kiss me!"

And at her whisper, passion's knife struck deeper than fear's: so that, even while the great 'plane raced headlong at the battlements of the storm, Cranston, lifting all her body to him, crushed her red lips silent under the fury of his kiss. . . .

. . . . She was still in his arms when the storm struck; when, hand tightening on hand, they saw the fuming cloud-battlements topple above the windows; when, lip loosening from lip, they knew the sun-lantern blown out and the purple dark streaming at them from the nadir of the skies. He could not loose her, when sun, sky, earth, colours and all known things were wiped out; and she asked him, her breasts still throbbing against his, "Gerry—Gerry darling—what is it—what is it—is it death?"

He himself did not know if it were death. In the blackness of the cabin, he could feel the great 'plane pitching and rolling, rolling and pitching like a ship in a hurricane; could hear, even through the storm-darkened windows, the wind shrieking round the struts, shrieking against their wing-tips, shrieking through their wires.

She asked him again, tremulous: "Gerry! Is it death? Is it death?" And even while he answered her, coolly, his brain

frozen sudden to the old courage, "There's no danger, dear; you're safe, quite safe; rest in my arms", it seemed to Cranston as though the engine must be conking, as though already they were nose-diving, as though no power in heaven could save them from crashing to the sea.

But the engine had not conked, nor were they nose-diving. Above the cabin—though the roar of the wind had drowned the roaring of them—those sixteen cylinders still throbbed steady as they spun the screw. Up there, above the cabin, where two men crouched in their cockpit from the drive of the wind, the joy-stick still held steady between the boy-pilot's knees. He was one with his 'plane, that boy-pilot; one with the thing he drove. He could feel her heavy on the handle of his joy-stick, heavy on the rudder-shoes under his booted feet. His eyes, his ears, his limbs, every ounce and every atom of him were at work with her, at work against the storm. The light of the sky had gone out; but the lights of his gyroscope were winking to guide him, winking green as he swung to starboard, winking red as he swung to port. Watching those lights, watching the pressure-gauges beside them; listening, listening always, as hands worked her and feet worked her through the storm, to the steady throb of those sixteen saviour cylinders, he had no fear, no time for fear.

Only in the darkness of the cabin was fear. For now, hardly Cranston's courage could help Angela. Desperately, she clung to him; desperately, her hands sought his. "Gerry," she gasped. "Gerry! It *is* death—death."

He said to her, his brain still frozen to the old courage, "There's no danger—lie still."

She lay still, crushed in his arms. Crushing her to him, he heard the rain rattle as hail rattles on their storm-darkened windows. It seemed to him that they were still nose-diving—nose-diving for the sea; that they must both die, die like rats in this narrow cabin where her mouth had been crushed under his. He did not want her to die. He wanted her to live. Dead, he could never more crush her mouth under his.

And then, suddenly, splendidly, he knew that they might not die; that the engine was still beating, beating steady above the thresh of the storm. More hail-shot rattled at their windows. The 'plane corkscrewed, terrifying the woman in his arms. He said to her once more, "You're safe—quite safe—there's no danger—lie still."

But in her terror, she could not lie still. He felt her body writhe; felt her little finger-tips thrusting like ramrods at the muscles of his arm. And in her terror, speech came to her

speech breathless and half coherent, a gasp in the face of death: "Gerry, don't let me die; don't let me die. Gerry, I can't bear to lose you, I couldn't bear to lose you. That's why I came with you. Gerry—don't be angry—don't be angry with me because I came with you. Just save me—save me. Gerry, Gerry darling, I don't want to die."

Her gasping ceased; and her writhing with it. And now, abruptly, holding her fainted in his arms, Gerald Cranston saw that death had actually stayed its hand from them, that they were through the worst of the storm. The 'plane was still corkscrewing, pitching and rolling to the drive of the wind. But already, he could feel the wind-drive lessening; could see, through their clearing windows, the storm-dark rolling away. The storm-dark was lightening, lightening and lightening to a dun-gray slather. Then, miraculously, in a moment and a moment, the slather fell away, all air-movement ceased, and he looked upon the sun.

The sun hung high and steady on their starboard bow. Its rays darted sharp silver swords through the Triplex. He observed that the steel foot-rest against which his feet were still braced had buckled like soft iron; that some water had jetted from the water-bottle, making a sharp triangular splash on the "Notices to Passengers"; that the air-speed indicator marked a hundred miles an hour. Angela still lay, white-faced and unmoving, in the support of his arms. Her little hands dangled against his breast. Her head had fallen back, and the hat from it. Against the ivory of her skin, her closed eyelids shewed as two pale-blue flowers.

For a second, he thought her dead; and the thought was yet another knife-thrust through the chain-mail of his self-control. It stabbed him deep, deeper than his fear for her, deeper than his passion. For it stabbed him, strangely, up there in the sun-blazing skies, to pity—to the first real pity he had ever known for fellow-human. It weakened him, not as a wound weakens, but as those queer gods who rule human destinies had always meant that he should be weakened—to a new strength, to the strength of charity. "She was afraid," he thought. "Yet she came with me." Then, moved beyond fear, beyond passion, moved almost to that real love which was one day to find birth in him, he gathered her closer in his arms, and, bending, kissed the pale-blue flowers of her eyelids.

The flowers quivered to his kiss; and deliciously he knew her alive. Through the pallor of her lips, a breath came to his. Her dangling hands trembled.

He lifted his face from hers; unbraced his feet from the buckled foot-rest; rose with her, light as a child, in his arms; laid her, just breathing, gently along the wicker of the seat; unpinned her hat; folded her fur under her head; and made his way forward. One of the water-tumblers had cracked; but the other was still whole. He filled it from the remnant of liquid in the bottle; dipped his handkerchief in it; and returning to her, knelt down to sop her forehead.

The cold water drew a moan from her—a second moan. Her eyelids flickered again. Slowly, the colour came back to her lips. At last, she opened her eyes wide; looked up into his.

"What's that light?" she asked. He told her, "The sunlight. We got through." Her eyes closed again; and for a while, she seemed consciousless.

When she next looked at him, spoke with him, it was as a woman satiate, worn out with emotion: "Gerry—I feel so tired. Let me sleep. There's a dear."

He rose from his knees; found his own overcoat; spread it over her; heard her regular breathing; knew that she really slept; looked out, away from the sun, through the window above her head.

§ 5

No land was to be seen—only snow, continent upon continent of blinding cloud-snow that stretched to the ultimate horizon. The snow glittered, flashed like mother-of-pearl in the sun. Over it, almost level with them, slid the shadow of their own wings. The clack of the tractor-screw thrummed monotonous as some huge clock-work. Cranston looked at his watch; saw that they had been ninety minutes in air; went forward; tapped on the pilot's window.

The window opened; and the young face of their observer, castrol-smeared, peered in at him through the six-inch frame of it. "Hope we didn't put the wind up the lady," shouted the observer.

"She's asleep," shouted Cranston. "How much longer to Le Bourget?"

"Not more than forty minutes—if we haven't lost direction."

"Where do you reckon we are now?"

"Pretty well over Étaples."

The window closed. The 'plane flew on, unmoving as a rock between its strutted wings. Cranston made his way aft; made

sure that Angela still slept, and sat down just in front of her. He wanted to think, to deliberate with himself what they should do. But no thought came—only a renewing of desire. The sleeping woman was his—his. He remembered how he had willed that she should not die.

Five minutes passed. He saw the cloud-snow melt, as real snow melts, in the sun. Ten minutes passed. Slowly, through its melting snow-screen, the earth swam up to view. Étaples lay behind them—Abbeville dead below. He had a vision of white coast-line, curving towards the sun; of dark clouds driving across a molten sea.

Fifteen minutes passed. The sea had disappeared, and the clouds with it. All France slid, an endless open chess-board, under their lofted wheels.

Twenty minutes passed. Twenty-five minutes. The woman was still sleeping. The triangles of Poix had dwindled astern. The speed-indicator still clocked its remorseless hundred. Beauvais—flattened house-tops dominated by a wedding-cake cathedral—slid forward, slid under. Presently, dark shadows against an emerald plain, he observed the hills which guard Paris.

He looked at his watch again: decided he must rouse Angela; turned, and saw that she was just awake. "Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"Very nearly."

"Then please give me my hat." He gave her her hat, a silk hand-bag he found on the floor. "And take this coat off me."

He took the coat off her; and she sat up, pulled the hat over her fair curls, opened the hand-bag, surveyed herself in its mirror. "I look awful," she said, "and, of course, you're hating me. It's only natural that you should hate me. I'm a coward. I've got no grit. You said once—I haven't forgotten—that you couldn't bear people with no grit. Besides—I cheated you. You never meant to bring me."

Her eyes looked up into his; and for a full minute, Cranston could find no answer. The blood at his forehead beat louder than the beat of their engines. He was aware that his hands had clenched at his side; that every muscle in him had gone taut, rigid with his wanting of her. She repeated her words: "You never meant to bring me."

He knew, dimly, that the 'plane was coming down, banking as it came; that the green pond below was Le Bourget; that beyond Le Bourget, its houses gleaming gray against the silver sickle-bends of the Seine, lay Paris.

Then the port wing rose; the cabin-floor tilted between his feet; and, almost as though the 'plane had thrown him there, he found himself kneeling against Angela, whispering hoarsely as he gathered her in his arms: "You're mine—mine!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

§ 1

THE bodily passions, howsoever fervent, are at best only love's demonstration; at worst, love's mere simulacra—false images which men and women worship for lack of the true.

The end of such worship is inevitable, satiety; and that end to her liaison with Gerald Cranston, Angela Hemmingway, lying lazily beautiful between warm sheets, foresaw clear as the early morning Parisian sunlight which streamed in from the Rue de Rivoli through the high windows of her luxurious bedroom. "One day," thought Angela, "soon, perhaps, we shall tire of one another."

The thought was bitter; yet already almost bearable. For a week—fervently and in secret—she had been Gerry's mistress: and all through that week, the aptitudes in her had been accustoming themselves to the certainty that Gerry's love for her, as hers for him, was not the grand passion she had once dreamed it might become, but only an episode in their separate lives.

During that episode—it pleased her, blinking kitten-wise at the sun, to recall every moment of it—she had taught him much, altered him a little, humanized him a little, made him more the man and less the millionaire. But her own nature she had not altered, could never alter. Her own nature was not like Gerry's—essentially dour, essentially precise, essentially single-purposed and single-sensationed. For her, life must hold many sensations, many purposes. Even abandoning herself to the passion-hot moment, she could look beyond the passion-hot moment into the passion-cold future. And that future, she had realized for some days, could scarcely be lived with Gerry.

Gerry, unpossessed, had drawn her to him by a thousand cords: Gerry, possessed, held her only by one. Eventually, that cord must snap.

A waiter bringing early breakfast disturbed the train of her thoughts. She told the man to put his tray on the table by the

window; and, when he had gone, climbed daintily out of bed. Then, slipping her pale feet into quilted silk moccasins, and donning her dressing-gown, a flimsy silken thing trimmed with white fur at neck and sleeves, she sat down to drink her coffee.

The coffee stimulated her. Pouring herself a second cup, nibbling pleasurably at the crescent-shaped rolls of flaky bread, she dallied with the idea of making Gerry marry her. "I'm too fond of him for that," she thought whimsically. "And besides, I'm no mate for a cave-man."

For of course Gerry was a cave-man, *the* cave-man. Of love as demanded by an emotionally sophisticated modern woman, he had no conception. There was no poetry in him, no finesse. He took love, as he took life, with both hands. He could neither trifle nor toy with it. Desiring, he never looked beyond acquiring. His passions were the hobbledehoy's passions—violent, inarticulate.

Yet his desires, his passions were all for her. . . .

Her breakfast finished, Angela took a cigarette from the tortoiseshell box on her dressing-table; and, lighting it, continued her musings.

Cave-lover, hobbledehoy, taker with both hands—Gerry might be all these. But at least he was a Man. A superman, perhaps? However their liaison ended, she would never forget the littlest moment of it. Her memories of him would always be like wine—like some rare and precious vintage stored up for her epicureanism to sip in that old age which is every woman's dread.

Yet eventually, inevitably, they would have to sip the last of the wine. . . .

As she laid aside that early-morning cigarette and watched it burn out on the ash-tray, the semblance of a frown crinkled the smooth of Angela's forehead. For a while, the aptitudes, the experiences in her burked reality. Insofar as she understood love, she still loved, was still insatiate of Gerry. To sip the last of that wine; to watch, while she drained the dregs of it, the red flame of passion smoulder to gray ash between herself and him, to break the bodily hold of his masculinity, would be torture, torment unendurable.

Nevertheless—reality might be torment but one had to face it—one day, soon perhaps, passion's flame would burn low. Then, inevitably, Gerry's individualism, his essential dourness and essential precision, would re-surge; his single-purposed will-to-power pull him, as surely as the moon pulls the tides, from out the grip of her subduing arms.

She examined those arms now, the one still circled by the

bracelet Gerry had given her, the other bare and beautiful to the rounded wrist and the slim ringless fingers, stretching them high from the fur-trimmed sleeves of her dressing-gown, letting her eyes linger appraisingly on their blue-veined perfection. For seven days and seven nights, those arms, those fingers, had held Gerry safe. For how much longer could they so hold him? For another night? For another week? For another month?

The semblance of a frown grew more than semblance; and, dropping her arms to her sides, Angela Hemmingway locked her pale fingers tight across the silk of her lap. "Don't take him from me," she prayed, queerly to some queer god, "not yet. . ."

So she prayed for a long time; prayed vaguely after the manner of her kind, that the transient might endure, the world be re-moulded, the sun stand still for ever and a day. And almost, so praying, it was in her to wish that she had been born ugly: because, ugly, she might have escaped from life, and from all those experiences which told her—with piteous yet pitiless emphasis—that, even as she had won Gerry, by the ungratified passions, so, by the gratification of those passions, she would lose him.

That mood, as all her moods, passed; and, rising, she began to pace the room. Fate—said her new mood—was stronger than prayer. What had been, had been. What was, was. What had to be, had to be. Best, then, seize happiness on the wing; enjoy the gifts while the queer god lavished them, the sunshine before the deluge!

And to-day, the sun was shining, shining on this city which had given her Gerry—on the clean width of its streets and the clean autumn-foliaged gardens where women walked with their lovers, on the high white buildings and the golden dome of the Invalides and the gargoyled buttresses which etched themselves gray and sepia against the Parisian sky.

Paris! City of light loves, of paganism made perfect! Was not she, Angela Hemmingway, had she not always been, at one with the spirit of it, with that spirit which is the very obverse of Anglo-Saxon sentimentality? Should that spirit fail her when the time came—if come it must—to sip the last of the wine? Surely not! Surely, even if Gerry were the first to tire, she would be strong enough to lose him, as she had won him, with never a scruple, never a regret.

Slowly, she walked to the window; opened it; and tried to look out over Paris. But the sunlight blinded her. The keen autumn airs were heady as aphrodisiacs. She let them play on

her closed eyelids, on the soft fur which edged the bosom of her dressing-gown.

Perhaps, after all, there need be no parting. . . .

§ 2

Meanwhile, Angela's lover had been afoot since nine, striding easily—his stick under his arm, his soft hat thrust back from his forehead—out of the Meurice, under the colonnades of the Rue de Rivoli, across the wide open space of the Place de la Concorde, and up the tree-fringed avenue of the Champs Elysées towards the Bois de Boulogne.

Footing it thus, as had now been his habit for seven sun-lit mornings, many new thoughts, many new sensations amazed Gerald Cranston. Though the physical routine of early-rising still held, all other routines—and especially that mental discipline which had been his pride—were momentarily in abeyance. For a week he had neither worked, nor contemplated work. For a whole week, as a sailor on his spree or a schoolboy on his holiday, he had delivered himself up, a happy captive, to the bewitchment of his new possession, Angela.

For was not this newest possession of his, this Angela of gold and ivory whose scarlet lips he could still imagine crushed against his own, this Angela whose every tantalizing caress left him the more insatiate of her caresses,the very affirmation of his manhood, the very choicest of all his possessions, the utter climax of material existence, the utter meaning of life? Had she not shewn him, in those blue mirrors of pleasure which were her eyes, the folly of self-denial, of self-righteousness, of all the bodily repressions which he had hitherto practised, as monks practise the scourge, for sheer vanity of the flesh?

All said and done, was not the whole of life mere vanity of the flesh, a perpetual gratification of this impulse, that desire? Why, then, refuse gratification to the main impulse, the sex-desire? Why, living as a man by day, seek to be a monk by night?

Pacing deliberately as ever, he passed the great white bulk of the Hotel Astoria, passed the beflagged gateway of the Arc de Triomphe, and so came into the Bois de Boulogne. They were to lunch in the Bois—at Armenonville. His imagination dallied, lover-like, with the moment of Angela's arrival. She would be in the car he had hired for his stay; wearing one of the new frocks he had insisted on buying for her, the emerald ring they had chosen together at Lacloche's. Money! Yes, one had to have money. Thank the Lord, one had plenty.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that it still lacked more than two hours to the moment of her arrival; and, thoughtful, continued his walk through the park. But his thoughts held no continuity, no logic. Momentarily, he could neither reason nor concentrate: he could only feel. Momentarily, his brain, obsessed by passion, refused to discipline any of its processes. Instead of the old clear-cut mind-pictures, a series of blurred visions projected and re-projected themselves, subtly, secretly, pleasurably, on the screens of his memory.

Those visions, as his mind's eye saw them, were all of his intimacy with Angela. Nothing in them recalled, even vaguely, his intimacy with that other, with the woman to whom, ten months since, he had publicly plighted his troth. Bewitched, he bade Hermione await her owner's pleasure. If, during that week of passion, he thought of her at all, it had not been as of a wife, but as of a woman who, by entrapping him into matrimony, had acquired various rights over him. The right, for instance, to demand that there be certain secrecies, certain furtivenesses about his relations with Angela!

For, even in his bewitchment, it never crossed Cranston's mind to let Hermione divorce him. His code never suggested to him that he was under any obligation to obtain his 'freedom' and marry Angela. Marriage, as he now saw it, had nothing whatever to do with passion: passion, in his present conception, being a thing apart, a secret roll of treasure. Like the locked cash-book in his safe at Aldford Street!

He did, of course, realize, vaguely, that he had been 'unfaithful' to his wife. But the realization did not, for the present, trouble him. Adultery, he had been brought up to believe, was a strictly female form of sin; his own conduct the usual male outcome of 'unhappy' marriages. Hermione, moreover—his experience with Angela seemed to indicate—would be, would always have been content enough with technical wifehood. She did not love him. On the contrary, she despised him. His tie to her was purely legal; had been so ever since the moment when, across Arthur's cot, mutual antagonism had snapped all other ties between them.

The lover's pace slackened; stopped. He lit himself a cigar; and dawdled, mind and body alike relaxing, happily indolent and indolently happy, down a long autumn-tinted avenue towards the heart of the Bois. At that early hour, the woodland walks were almost empty. Now and again, a beribboned *nounou* wheeling a baby-laden perambulator eyed him incuriously. Now and again, some unaccompanied woman, foot-

ing it for her health's sake along the gravel, darted him an appraising glance through the folds of her veil. Once in a while, a motor purred by along the macadam. Once in a while, a uniformed horseman trotted fast over the roadside tan. Presently, resuming his accustomed stride, he left the last of the *nounous*, the last of the women behind ; and, turning off the avenue down a winding by-road, found himself in absolute solitude.

The solitude matched his present temper. Rounding an elbow of the road, he came on a small semi-circular clearing in the woods ; and spying, some way from the road, a seat under an old tree, made his way to it and sat down to finish his cigar.

Seated thus, something in him began to respond, as nothing in him had ever before responded, to the simple beauty of natural things. The sunlight, flickering through leaves to tree-bole ; the green turf under his feet ; the blue of his cigar-smoke upcurling against the blue of the sky ; the note of a bird in the undergrowth ; the delicate perfume of the ripened woods—everything he could see, smell, touch, hear, pleased him with a curiously pagan, curiously sensual pleasure. These things seemed to interpret—as neither words nor thoughts could ever quite interpret—all that he felt towards Angela.

Angela ! As yet, no thought of the inevitable break with her had crossed his mind. He could still dally, lover-like, with the memory of that moment when he had crushed her to him in the air. . . .

Yet even remembering that moment, even thrilling to the prospect of other moments, he knew, subconsciously if not consciously, that her hold on him was a bodily hold ; that one day, inevitably and inexorably, his old self would rise up to deny the necessity of it, to taunt him with his lapse from the creed of self-control.

The subconscious knowledge shocked him : so that for a while he regained concentration.

Angela—why not face the fact ?—had brought a new issue, the sex-issue, into his existence ; had shewn him that life was not as he had hitherto imagined it, immutable, a thing of codes and regulations, but a medley of conflicting phases, conflicting desires. And his own desires, here in Paris, had added to their number. Power and money no longer satisfied all his cravings. He had other cravings, cravings after pleasure, after ease, after —strange thought for Cranston !—love.

He tried to dismiss that last craving, to say of Angela, as he had said of all other women, " She suits me—but that's all."

But the craving would not be dismissed, nor the old shibboleth repeat itself.

In that mood he began to wonder about love, speculating whether love and the sex-craving were one ; and, so speculating, sought to hack his way, as he had never before sought to hack his way, through that tangled forest which men, for want of a better name, call Sex. And the undergrowth of that forest baffled him as it baffles all those who worship the false images that are but love's simulacra.

He could see no path through the forest. Sex was, had to be. The queer gods had equipped man and woman with certain functions, which—unlike all other functions—disuse could not atrophy. Why ? To what end ?

For a space, the *nounous* and their wheeled charges seemed the answer to his question. The purpose of sex—the one purpose of it—was reproduction. But the answer failed to satisfy his civilized intelligence. He revolted from the thought that a mere desire for reproduction had drawn him to Angela, Angela to him. And, besides, those unaccompanied women of the veiled appraising glances gave the lie to the answer of the *nounous*. Whatever sex might be, it was more—far more—than the simple urge to parenthood.

Thinking thus, he rose and made his way back to Armenonville.

§ 3

The lovers' arrival at their *rendezvous* in the Bois synchronized almost to a second—Angela in the smartly-driven Charron *coupé-de-ville* dashing up just as Cranston handed his hat and stick to the uniformed attendant behind the opening glass doors of the restaurant.

Going out to meet her, standing bare-headed on the stone step to hand her down from the *coupé*, the sight of her, the confiding touch of her fingers thrilled him anew ; dispelled all but the faintest recollection of the thought-crisis through which he had been passing.

Except for gloves, shoes and stockings of her favourite gray, Angela was all in soft black. An ankle-length dress, newest of new fashions, swathed her like a scarf. A ruched cloak hung from her shoulders. A black-enamel and diamond arrow glittered among the ospreys which circled her small hat. As Cranston conducted her within, he could not help overhearing the favourable comments—"*Chic, quoi ? Mais oui. Americaine*"—of

three spurred officers who sat drinking their *apéritifs* at one of the little iron tables set here and there on the gravel under the trees.

And the comments added fuel to the flame of his excitement. Leading her into the already-filling restaurant-room; following at her side while the obsequious *maître-d'hôtel* led them to their seats by the long window, he overheard other Frenchmen and Frenchwomen admiring his mistress—and knew the sheer pride of being envied for something other than his money. What was money? No money—it came to him—could have bought this exquisitely turned-out woman, who seated herself like a queen at the flower-decked table; who belonged, as no other woman had ever belonged, to him, to Gerald Cranston, sometime the Leicestershire corn-chandler.

He excused himself; begged her to order their lunch; went to wash his hands. By the time he got back, she had already done his bidding. They were to have melon, she told him; *œufs Grand Duc; langouste Thermidor; Entrecôte à la minute*, and nectarines. For drink, Château Yquem. "A regular man's meal, Gerry."

He approved her choice with a smile; drank the Martini she had not forgotten; appraised, in wondering silence, the dainty picture she made against the window-background of sunshine and autumnal trees.

She was all of a woman, yet often he thought of her as a girl. And he thought of her as a girl now, comparing her slender frailty with his own great-heighted physique. The ruched cloak, dropped carelessly over the chair, had revealed a tantalizing square of youthful skin. No pearls circled her fine, flawless throat. Her arms, bare from tip of shoulder to finger-tip—she had removed gloves with cloak—were virginal in their appealing contours. The thin circlet of his first giving still glittered high where he had clasped it. His latest offering, the big oblong-cut emerald, glimmered on her wedding-finger. Daylight betrayed never a line on the oval of her cheeks or the white temples under their smoothed gold wings of drawn-back hair. Her eyes were luminous, untroubled as a baby's, unruffled as deep blue pools. The silence of her scarlet lips matched his own. It seemed to him that she was happy with the happiness of Spring-time.

The canteloupe came in state; and over it—as they sprinkled the pink melon-flesh with ginger and scooped it from the mottled rind—he asked her: "Where do we drive this afternoon? I thought of Versailles—if that's not too far."

Angela's eyes still shewed as unruffled pools—yet she debated

with herself a good fifteen seconds before answering the question ; and debating, looked down at the diamond-clasped black satin bag she had laid beside her plate. There was a telegram in that bag ; and she knew, had known instinctively ever since she retrieved the unopened envelope from the marble mantelpiece of Gerry's sitting room, what it might, must foreshadow : so that the paragraph in the Paris *Matin* through which she had skimmed her way while waiting to fit on her new opera-cloak in the Rue de La Paix—the paragraph headed, " *Angleterre. Grève des Mineurs* "—had merely confirmed, not originated her apprehensions.

Gerry repeated his question ; and, her apprehensions lessening, she answered him easily : " Yes. I'd love to shew you Versailles, Gerry. I was at school there. ' Angèle ', they used to call me. I'm afraid I was one of the wicked angels. Even then ! You see—— "

He frowned at that, as he always frowned at her public indiscretions ; and his frown, as always, amused her. Assured by a quick glance round the restaurant that there were neither English nor Americans among their fellow-lunchers, she began to tease the Puritan in him, forcing him, not exactly against his will but against his temperament, to respond.

Teasing him, she managed to put away most of her apprehensions. Since, obviously, this new Gerry of her creating had not even bothered to read his *Daily Mail* ; since, apparently, he was far more interested in her than in any coal-strike, she decided it quite unnecessary to give him the telegram—at any rate, till they had finished luncheon.

Their waiter cleared away the rinds of the melon. The wine-waiter brought the decanted Château Yquem, poured it carefully as its vintage deserved. Chatting and sipping, they finished their eggs, their hot lobster.

Watching her lover while she toyed with her *entrecôte*, Angela was again aware—and pleasurably—of the change she had wrought in him. She remembered their first meal together—the dinner at the Basque. Then, his interest in food had been a gourmand's interest, hunger : whereas to-day, it was the gourmet's interest, discrimination. One day, perhaps—his passionate hobbledehoyhood over—he would be a gourmet in love also. But that day would not be her day. She—said the aptitudes with their remorseless logic—had only taught him love's hunger. Her main charm for him was the charm of her contrast from his every-day work-a-day world. Once back in that world—she knew—he would resent her very teachings.

The knowledge, secretly saddening, stimulated her the more to gaiety. Her indiscretions grew daring. Over their nectarines, over the coffee and the Napoleon brandy which followed their nectarines, she chaffed him openly about her wooing of him. Again, he frowned. Again, his frown amused her. Smoothing his emerald against her cheek, she said archly: "Never mind, Gerry. I forgive you for making me behave like a *demi-mondaine*. It was worth while. At least, *I* think so. And you?"

She smiled at him; and the smile took the innuendo from her words. Her hand touched his. The brandy, potent yet smooth as cream, fired him almost to passion. He wished, suddenly, that they had lunched, as they had once dined, privately. He wanted, suddenly, to hear her admit that she loved him; to feel her lips crushed against his, her body crushed in his arms. Controlling himself, he felt his teeth meet through the butt of his unlit cigar.

"And you?" she reiterated. "Do you think *me* worth while, Gerry dear?"

He answered abruptly, his eyes dilating, "You know I do."

His eyes, his answer kindled her to recklessness. Drinking her brandy, she decided, definitely: "I won't give him the telegram till we get to Versailles."

§ 4

Yet for half their way to Versailles, the recollection of the telegram, of the paragraph in the *Matin*, made her fearful. "This is the end," she thought, "the end." And the thought was torment. It had been easy enough, alone in one's bedroom, to dally imaginatively with the idea of their parting; but alone with Gerry, the thing seemed unbearable, unbelievable.

His right arm had gone round her the moment they stepped into the car. Leaning hard against him, she pulled his other arm across her body. "Gerry," she whispered, "hold me close —close."

He held her close; and every now and then, as they zig-zagged out of Paris, his fingers caressed her through the folds of her dress, his lips sought hers in passion. "Love me, Gerry," she murmured between those kisses; and again, "I more than love you. I adore you."

Once free from the worst of the traffic, their French chauffeur drove with the élan of the war-days; and the mad speed suited both their moods. Houses, scenery—woods, the river, the hill of

Saint Cloud—flashed past unheeded. Their eyes were for each other : hers for the frosty dominance of his ; his for the luminous submissiveness of hers. And their thoughts were as their eyes, as their hands, love-locked. For now, consciously the one and subconsciously the other, both knew fervour at its climax ; knew that, whatsoever the future might bring, it would never bring back this tense and utter rapture.

Rapture, false yet wonderful, folded them from the world ; and even when, hurrying headlong from the last of the woods which fringe Versailles, their car swung hooting down the broad tramwayed Avenue des Reservoirs to pull up with a jar of brakes in the courtyard of the hotel, the wonder of it was still on them.

Hardly speaking, Gerry handed her down from the car. Hardly speaking, she led him away from the hotel, past the huge historied pile of the Château, and so into the storied park beyond.

The park was all deserted. No fountains played in Neptune's basin or Apollo's grot. Boatless, the long lake shone molten gold under the autumn sun. As yet, no tang of frost keened the air. The turf they trod yielded soft underfoot. Trees, mailed giants in russet armour, stood sentinel against the October sky.

Angela led on—her fears forgotten—her left hand, with the fateful bag dangling from its wrist, clinging to Gerry's arm. Presently, the lake, the château pediment vanished among the russet trees. Presently—the Trianon, too, behind them—they reached other water, beech-girdled ; and, among the beeches, set high on a grassy knoll, that temple where an ill-fated queen worshipped, even as they, the bodily loves. And there, even as she, Angela Hemmingway offered her lips to her lover.

" Gerry," she begged him, " Gerry—don't ever forget."

For, kissing him, the bag had dropped from her wrist ; and sharply, while he was retrieving it, she remembered the telegram, her fears of it. One day, soon perhaps, he *would* forget.

" As if I could," he said.

They wandered away, passion-shaken, round the beech-girdled, turf-girdled waters ; past the thatched dairy where the ill-fated queen played milkmaid ; and eventually, careless whither they went, back to the shores of the main lake.

The sun had sunk to the russet tree-tops. The lake was no longer golden. Shadows blurred it—and mist. October's sky held the promise of frost. Autumn's hand lay heavy on the woods. The decay of them mounted ominous to Angela's nostrils. Her heart shuddered. Her hand shuddered fearfully on

Gerry's forearm. Once more, she thought : " This is the end—the end."

" Cold ? " he asked her.

" A little," she confessed. " Miserable, too. Apprehensive. I feel as though we were walking over our own graves."

" Nonsense," He pressed her hand. " You want your tea."

" Philistine ! " she laughed ; but there was no mirth in her laughter. She wanted, suddenly, to make an end, to shew him the telegram. The bag at her wrist seemed heavy—leaden with fate.

They returned, silent as they had gone out from it, past the Château to the hotel. There had been a Conference the week before, but to-day the big hall was empty as the park had been. He found her an armchair ; went off to order tea. Waiting for him, she thought : " I can't keep it from him till to-morrow. I daren't. I daren't trick him again."

When he came back, she had the telegram in her hands. " I found it this morning," she said. " In your sitting room. I ought to have given it you before. But I was afraid to. Because I know it's bad news. There's bad news in the papers, too —you can't have seen them—the miners are on strike."

Cranston's heart stopped one betraying beat. So the miners had come out, the fools ! Then, without a word, he took the envelope from her ; tore it open ; read it. Reading, his eyes hardened. " Harold's a fool, too," he said. " This means I'll have to go home."

" When ? " Angela's hands clenched on her lap.

For several moments, Cranston hesitated. The contents of the telegram did not shock him. In the plans made before he left Town, the eventuality of a short stoppage at the mines was well provided for. Still, he would have to go home—and quickly. Harold, in such an emergency, was not to be trusted. Nor Sandeman. After all, a man had to look after his own money. . .

His silence, the hardness of his eyes, terrified Angela.

" Gerry," she stammered, " Gerry—you're not angry with me ? You're not going back to-night ? "

" Good God, no ! "

The unusual profanity pleased, flattered the heroine in her. She had the impulse to self-torture.

" But you'll go to-morrow," she went on.

" I must. It doesn't matter—you'll come with me."

Before Angela could reply, the waiter appeared, clattering his tray. Pouring their tea, her impulse to self-torture persisted.

Gerry, a cigarette in his mouth, had relapsed into one of the old stubborn silences. Watching his eyes, she could see the brain behind them once more busied at its scheming. "I'm half forgotten already," she thought. "Even if I go to London with him—it can't last." She visualized him in London, dour, single-purposed, resenting his duties as her lover; remembered his voice over the telephone from Pinner's Court.

No! The thing couldn't last. The very qualities in him which had first appealed to her, forbade it. In the end, a man such as Gerry went back to his work. Yet for another night, he would be hers. Startlingly, theatrically, it came to her that she must make that night memorable for him—a night as no other in his life. She glanced round the old-fashioned hall; imagined the rest of the hotel; remembered a book she had once read. Then, quietly, she said, "Gerry, need we go back?"

He wrenched his brain from concentration; and asked, astonished: "What do you mean, dear? Of course we must go back. I can't neglect my business."

"I didn't mean that." His obtuseness brought a wry smile to her lips. "Naturally—whatever I decide to do—*you* must go back to London to-morrow. You mustn't neglect your work on my account. What I meant was—need we go back to the Meurice?"

"But—good Lord!—we can't sleep here."

"Why not?"

"Because——"

Her raised hand pleaded for silence. Leaning forward across the tea-table, she began whispering, "Dearest, don't let's go back to Paris. Let's stop here. I want to-night to be—different. I want to sleep all night in your arms. I've never done that—at the Meurice. But I could—here. Just for one night. Don't you understand? This evening, I don't want there to be any—any subterfuges. I want to share your room. Gerry, perhaps it's the last favour I'll ever ask you. Don't deny it me."

Her words moved, almost mastered him. How could he deny her any—even the maddest—favour? "But we've no luggage," he protested.

"We can buy what we need here. You needn't be afraid that I won't make myself nice for you."

"And the hotel people? Our chauffeur?"

"This is France. Not England. *They* won't mind. Gerry—as a favour to me!"

Then, while Cranston, suddenly afraid of scandal for her, still hesitated, her ungloved hand stole forward to rest

caressingly on his knees ; and, looking deep into the blue pools of her eyes, he knew himself, as never before, slave to a woman's caprices.

" Very well, dear," he said abruptly, " I'll try to arrange it " ; and thrusting the telegram deep into his jacket-pocket, strode off.

" My last victory," mused the heroine in Angela, her thoughts following him. But all that was best in her knew it for defeat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

§ 1

THE one human certainty is emotional re-action; and Gerald Cranston's re-action from the emotions of his week with Angela began at the very moment when—some thirty hours after they had set out for Versailles—he stepped from the Pullman at Victoria Station to find Havers and the Armstrong-Siddeley waiting his arrival.

Angela, alternately pleading the unreadiness of her new clothes and the readiness of scandal-mongers, had refused to accompany him; and throughout his journey he had been visualizing her; visualizing the high, quaintly furnished sitting-room where they had dined together, the faded roses of the carpet, the green brocade curtains festooned from their tarnished gilt pole, the bronze chrysanthemums in the Louis Seize vase on the satin-wood sideboard, the empty champagne-bottle on the spindle-legged table, the wood-fire smouldering in the French grate. "Ashes of our love, Gerry," she had said. Ridiculous saying! Still—she had been right not to accompany him. Havers might have found her presence—peculiar.

He asked Havers curtly, "Is everything all right at Aldford Street?" Havers answered, "I think so, sir"; retrieved his bags from the porter; and started for home.

All the short way home, memories—memories bitter-sweet as that Coty perfume for which he and Angela had searched the shops of Versailles—haunted his mind. It seemed to him that he would always remember her, curled kitten-wise in the silk dressing-gown he had bought her, on the sofa before the fire; that he would never forget the least little intimate detail of their last night together—how, doing her bidding, he had picked her up and carried her, almost as though she had been a child, to the huge four-postered bed in the room beyond; how, all night long, he had been conscious of her body warm against his; how, waking as the dawn came wanly out of darkness, he had thrilled to see her

sleeping, her gold hair unbound, her eyes veiled under their golden lashes, softly submissive in the crook of his arm. "Darling," she had murmured through her sleep. "Darling, don't wake me. . ."

Havers drove on, past Hyde Park Corner, towards Aldford Street; and, waking from day-dreams, Cranston knew that this was London; that here in London, even when she came back to him, nothing could ever be quite the same. Here in London—had not she herself said so as they sat together before the fire?—their love would become a thing of lies, of furtivenesses and subterfuges and endless clandestine deceits. He had laughed at her then, told her not to talk nonsense.

Yet was it so entirely nonsense? Smithers, his face one smile of dutiful welcome as the footman opened the front door of Aldford Street; Rennie, hovering diligent behind Smithers; each and every remembered ornament of the tessellated hall seemed to answer that the nonsense held some truth. "When she comes back," he thought, "we shall have to be careful."

They had laid supper in the dining-room; and as, not bothering to change his travelling-kit, he ate and drank of it, Cranston—responding more and more with every passing minute to the atmosphere of this disciplined home—remembered his promised baronetcy. No scandal, no hint of scandal, must be allowed to jeopardize the fulfillment of that promise.

He finished his supper; lit a cigar; dismissed his servants, and made his way to the sanctum. There, too, familiar things seemed warnings to secrecy. "I'm glad she never came here alone," he thought: and the thought chilled him.

Eager to drive the chilling thought away, he seated himself at the desk, drew a pile of opened letters towards him, and, scanning them rapidly, purposefully, managed to regain a little of his old concentration.

Soon, however—though he did his utmost to hold it on its course—his concentration veered from the business problem.

Once more, longingly, he visualized Angela. To-night and for many nights, there would be no Angela, no body to lie warm against his, no lips to whisper in his ears through the perfumed darkness, "Gerry, I love you."

He sat for a long while, his fingers playing idly with the papers on his desk; till gradually, so gradually that he was hardly aware of its processes, his brain concentrated again—this time on that emotion called Love which, long repressed, had come suddenly and strangely into his life. Reason, newly active, began to dissect that emotion, to analyze it. "Your feelings for Angela,"

asked Reason, " are they of the mind or of the body, spiritual or physical ? "

He tried to dismiss Reason's question—telling himself that the spiritual and the physical, the emotion called love and the emotion called passion were one and indivisible ; tried to recapture the carefree ecstasy of his week with Angela. But the carefree ecstasy would not be recaptured. In its stead, came memories of their parting ; of almost the last words she had spoken with him as they stood by the open door of the railway-carriage under the cold echoing vault of the Gare du Nord. " Something tells me," she had said, " that this is the end."

That, too, he had pooh-poohed for nonsense : assuring himself, assuring Angela, that their love, their passion would endure, must endure ; that within the week, within ten days at most, she would be back in London.

" And if I don't come back ? " she had asked. " What then ? "

" What then ? " The phrase repeated itself, tolling, solemn as a funeral-bell, in the towers of Cranston's mind. Reason asked him again : " What is this feeling—of the spirit or of the body, mental or physical ? "

Then Reason, done with hinting, put the straight questions : " Didn't your body escape your brain's control—over there, in Paris ? Isn't it still escaping ? " and the mental questions were like hammer-blows between the reasoner's eyes, dazing him, so that his brain refused further thought. In his bedazement, all memories of Angela went from him. He remembered only his fear, his life-long fear of giving himself in love to any woman. But now the fear was no longer subconscious, no longer unrealized.

And with that, re-action set in full-forced. " The woman tempted you," said the Puritan in him. " The woman tempted you ; and you fell." Yet the man in him still wanted the woman. In his brain, in his body, the want of her, the words of her, blended to sheerest hell.

Slowly, he rose from his desk ; and began to pace, nervous yet resolute, up and down the length of that well-ordered room. Like the room, his life must be orderly. And there was no orderliness in this emotion men called love. Love—said his old fear of it—held all, and more than all the dangers he had suspected. To succeed—and he, Gerald Cranston who had vowed himself to great tasks, *must* succeed—a man must put love aside, trample on it.

Automatically, thinking of those great tasks, he approached

the safe. Automatically, his right hand twirled the combination knob while his left sought the keys in his pocket. Automatically, he opened his private drawer; took out his private ledger; unlocked it and, still pacing, started in to study its pages. "Money!" said his brain. "Money and power! You shall worship no other gods. . ." But his body still craved to worship Angela.

Craving for her, the figures began to dance before his eyes. Mastering himself, he returned to his desk and read on—here of the Marankari Syndicate, there of his oil-deals, of his linseed speculations, of his Exchange gambles against New York or Berlin. Till finally, almost at the end of the book, he came on the section devoted to "Share Transactions. Cranston's, Limited." One page of that section—the page headed "Preferred Shares"—bore the entry, "Sold through McManus. Proceeds, £51,750 : 19 : 6, transferred to Trust Account, 'Gerald and Hermione Cranston on behalf of Hermione Elizabeth Cranston and Arthur Anthony Cosgrave'."

That leaf, too, he turned over. Yet the significance of the entry remained with him. Gradually, his business-concentration relaxed; gradually, so gradually that he was hardly aware of its processes, his brain switched to the problem of Hermione.

That problem—something warned him—had changed its shape since he last wrestled with it. He was still determined against Hermione; could still think of her, definitely, as the woman who had wronged him by marrying him for his money; who had doubted his honour, taunted him with his birth. But now, a new wrong had added itself to the old.

Hermione had never loved him—never even pretended to love him. Her very surrenders had been insults to his manhood—passionless, proud, coldly acquiescent. He remembered the night when he had gone to her room unbidden, the night when she had denied herself.

At the memory, hell renewed itself in him. That night, his want of Hermione had been much as the want which had driven him to Angela, physical!

Half-an-hour passed. Glancing at the Tompion clock, he saw that its hands already pointed midnight. "Time for bed," he thought vaguely; and re-locking his ledger, re-locked it in the safe. But the mere thought of his bare ascetic bedroom seemed to prove the impossibility of sleep; and after a moment's hesitation, he returned to his desk, and finished his survey of the business correspondence which Tillotson had set out for him. Then, turning his attention to the little pile of unopened envelopes

marked " Private ", he slit them casually ; one by one ; coming, at the very bottom of the pile, on a letter from his wife.

Her handwriting gave him no thrill. Reading that she was coming home in a fortnight, that she would be glad to be home ; that she hoped he had enjoyed his trip to Paris and would be glad to see her—he was aware solely of annoyance.

He did not want Hermione. He did not even want—God help him !—Angela. He only wanted tranquillity from woman—the single-purposed soul-certainty which had once been his.

§ 2

And in the week which followed his return from Paris, Cranston's mental re-action from woman mounted towards its zenith. Day and night, as a burnt child flings itself into water, he flung himself into business.

In business, he was unchanged—the same dour Cranston whom no man—save Ephraim Bewsher—had ever bested to his profit. Harold, summoned by telephone from Leicester ; Tillotson, Parker, Sandeman ; his bank-manager and his accountant ; the thousand-and-one folk he met daily could perceive no alteration in him, no lessening either of will-power or courage. " Go on ! " he told them all. " The strike's a flash in the pan. It can't last while control's on. This Government hasn't got the guts to fight anything to a finish."

Yet inwardly, the man was changed—a different Cranston. Angela had written him no word—and her silence made him doubly fearful. Alternately, he dreaded her return and dreaded her non-returning. If—when she got back to her little box of a house off Curzon Street ; when—if she telephoned him to come to her : what was he to do ? " Refuse," said Reason. " Tell her the thing must end. Break with her."

But how could he break with her ; how be harsh, cruel, as he had been cruel that other time on the telephone from Pinner's Court, the day before they flew to Paris ? " You can't do that," said some new man in him. " You must go to her, explain."

Explain what ? That he had done with her ? " Impossible ! " said his body.

For his body, every sense and fibre of it, still craved for her. In the evenings, fighting for concentration at that paper-littered desk under the alabaster centre-light, he would catch imagination prowling beast-wise towards another room, a Chinese sitting-room, flower-decked, its divan piled high with softest cushions.

"Am I to be a womanizer?" he used to ask himself, scourging imagination to its lair. "Am I to be a womanizer like the rest of them?"

Then, on the eighth day, just as he was starting for the office, came her letter. The handwriting on the envelope set his heart beating. He told Havers to wait; took the thing back into his sanctum; opened it; read the enclosure three times.

Why hadn't he written? she wrote. Or had she asked him not to write? On second thoughts, she had said something of the kind. Still, he needn't have taken it *au pied de la lettre.* She was still at the Meurice; still thinking of him. And the more she thought of him, the less—"forgive me, Gerry!"—she saw herself coming back. After all, he *was* married. And marriage —"even a *mariage de convenance*"—did make a difference. Besides, London was not Paris, "nor Versailles, darling." In London, things could never be quite (underlined) the same. Didn't he (underlined twice) think so, too, now that he'd had time to "get back into his groove?"

The wisdom of that letter hurt Cranston—as Angela had never realized that he could be hurt. It pained him to imagine that her fervour, too, must be cooling. Yet, in pain's despite, there was consolation in the certainty that she meant to leave the matter of her return and of what might happen after her return, in his hands.

Subconsciously, he debated those matters all day. Consciously, knowing that any decision reached must be final, he wrestled with them all evening. But decision tarried—his impulse being for compromise rather than the clean break, to let her come home, to let things take their course. It seemed horrible that nine short days should see the beginning and the end of their intimacy. The mere idea made the Puritan in him go hot for shame.

Her reference to Hermione, however, left even the Puritan in him cold. The problem of his "*mariage de convenance*" played no rôle in his deliberations. His rebounding from his wife, unlike his reaction from his mistress, was now complete. Of her, physically, he would have no more. The decencies alone forbade it. Remained, as he saw it, only to decide whether he would have more of the physical Angela. Surely, knowing his need for her on so low a plane, continuance of their intimacy would be even more horrible than the clean break? "Weakling!" said the fears in him. "Coward! Write to her—and have done with women once and for all."

All the same, for two days and yet a third, he could not make

up his mind to answer the letter. Its complexities apart, correspondence on such a subject would be indecent. Besides, he might hurt her. Women didn't understand a man's viewpoint on sex-questions.

Angela's second letter, therefore, the letter which began, "Gerry dear, you haven't written, and I think I understand why," came as a shock. Reading the words she had penned so carefully, it seemed to him almost as though her mind must have been inside his throughout its deliberations; almost as though she had followed every thread of his subconscious arguing and knitted them together in those eight pages of her largely legible handwriting.

"So admit," finished the seventh of those pages, "that my premonitions at Versailles have come true; that it *was* the end; that my return to London would only spoil a beautiful memory. Admit that your business, your ambition, your whole outlook on life prevent you from becoming permanently my lover. Admit, too, that you're repenting, as I knew you would. Does it console you to know that I'm not repenting; that I never shall repent? It was all wonderful while it lasted, Gerry dear. But love doesn't last for ever. And ours is over—over and done with. I know it. That's why I'm not coming back to Curzon Street."

The eighth page ended half-way down and rather abruptly. She thought she might winter in Rome—or possibly Florence. In the Spring, perhaps, they could resume "the old platonic friendship." Meanwhile—this in a postscript—"Don't think I'm doing this because you're married. Marriages, especially a marriage like yours to Hermione, don't mean much now-a-days. I'm doing it simply because you happen to be you; because you don't really *need* me. Men of your stamp don't need any particular woman. The Lord knows (your phrase!) why. Is it because you're too big for us?"

Putting that letter back in its envelope; locking the envelope away in the private drawer of his safe, Cranston's main feeling was relief. Miraculously, the sword of Angela's wisdom had severed his Gordian knot. Miraculously, he had regained his freedom.

The relief, however, held little tranquillity. On his way to the office, rage, gust upon gust of purely masculine rage, took him by the throat. Remembering the first trick she had played on him, how she had found out his route to Paris, and her second trick, the concealment of the telegram, he told himself, unreasoning and unreasonable, that this was the third trick; that this proved, once and for all, that she had cheated him from start

to finish, only pretended to love him. "So that's woman," he thought; and with that, his reaction from his mistress, as his rebounding from his wife, completed itself.

Never again, he swore at that zenith of his reaction, would he let passion swerve him even by a hair's breadth from self-discipline; never again, even for an instant, would he allow his brain to slacken its control over his body. Angela, cruelly wise, had been cruelly right. He did *not* need her; did not need any woman. Women—wives, mistresses, all the rag-tag and bob-tail of casual femaledom that complicated man's emotional existence—were at best a raffle of fluff and chiffon round the humming wheels of business; at worst, bales of useless merchandise which the queer gods flung across life's track to ditch the express of a man's career.

Answering, as kindly as hypocrisy might, that second letter from Paris, he thanked the queer gods that *his* business express had not been ditched; and drove it full-speed ahead down another man's gradient.

That gradient was Gordon Ibbotsleigh's.

"Yours received"—cabled Ibbotsleigh the day before Hermione returned to London. "Believe have found lode under heavy overburden and traced for three miles. Lode appears nearly vertical and ore exceedingly rich. With your sanction propose cease calabashing alluvial and concentrate entire efforts sinking more shafts and clearing away overburden. If possible remit further five thousand pounds by cable to Kano. Certain results will justify expense. Mailing full report."

To Gerald Cranston, decoding that cable, remitting the money, and dictating a careful letter to his father-in-law, his wife's re-arrival in Aldford Street seemed the most ordinary of ordinary events.

CHAPTER TWENTY

§ 1

To Hermione, however, her re-arrival in Aldford Street seemed fateful—as important, more important perhaps, than her actual wedding-day.

When, bidding goodbye to the host and hostess of that Hampshire shooting-party which Gerald should have attended with her, she stepped into the waiting Rolls for her three-hour journey home, she could scarcely analyze the medley of sensations that overwhelmed her mind. After eleven weeks of separation from her second husband—weeks during which, as she now realized, her feelings towards him had changed more than once—the prospect of their almost immediate re-union set all her nerves jangling.

Gradually, though, as the Rolls sped silently on, the nerve-storm passed from her; and sensations gave place to thought. Absence might not have made her heart grow fonder; but it had, at least, shewn her conscience its duty. And that duty, for the moment, was reconciliation.

Reconciliation, a return to the old easy-going way, should be simple enough. Gerald, surely, would not wish to continue their quarrel. And as far as she was concerned, the quarrel was over, done with.

It had been an idiotic quarrel, anyway—senseless. Between herself and Gerald might be no love—that was in the bond. But the bond did not include intolerance any more than it excluded affection, mutuality of interest, a gradual drawing together which, one day perhaps, might lead them into a less arid country than the one they had hitherto inhabited. "It shan't be my fault if it doesn't," she determined suddenly. And the determination grew with every speeding mile.

She began to see pictures of Gerald, to remember the months since their wedding-day, to realize how little he and she had ever been *en rapport*, to ask herself why it was that—even in their

rare physical contacts—there should have been hardly a spark of true intimacy. "Was that my fault?" she asked herself. "Was I afraid of him—because of Tony?"

Then she tried to remember Tony—the old love, the old shame. But both the love and the shame seemed dead. Memory could scarcely see her first husband's face, scarcely hear the tone of his voice.

The Rolls rolled on, noiseless, swift as a train. Already—the ivory clock at her elbow told her—they had been two hours under way. Thought reverted to Gerald. She began to reproach herself because she had been so long absent from him; to wonder whether he had been lonely without her, lonely without Arthur. How fond Gerald was of Arthur; how foolish had been her jealousy of his fondness! Perhaps, contrary to his custom, he would leave the office early; meet the child and its nurse at Waterloo.

Curious, that child-fondness in Gerald! Supposing Arthur had been his, not Tony's—would their quarrel have occurred? "Of course it wouldn't," thought Hermione—and the thought brought a faint flush to her cheeks. Gerald—that, too, was in the bond—had expected a family from her.

Another quarter-of-an-hour passed, bringing London close. She felt her nerves jangling again; wondered suddenly how Gerald would welcome her, what he would say to her, whether the situation would be difficult. Automatically, as Lees slackened pace on the outskirts of suburbia, she drew the gold mirror from her vanity-case, and inspected herself with some care. Inspection told her that she looked her best, that certain little lines which that first month of solitude had graven on her face were gone, that the sea air had put a touch of carmine into the pallor of her cheeks.

Consciousness of her attractions restored her calm. Reconsidering the duty of reconciliation, a little of her old whimsical humour came back. All said and done, why force a stagey reconciliation, make them both still more ridiculous? She and Gerald had been two of a kind, one as much to blame as the other. Conjugally speaking, their best plan would be to call it quits—say nothing—just "kiss and make it up."

But the thought of Gerald's kisses flushed her cheeks anew. Putting away the vanity-case, she said to herself: "I'm not in love with him. I never was, never pretended to be in love with him. We must have some explanation before he . . . kisses me. If we don't, the whole thing's just . . . beastliness."

Then—her imagination projecting itself—she felt her pride once more in revolt from the unwritten marriage-bargain.

"Matrimony without love," she mused. "Can it be anything but . . . beastliness?"

The musing terrified her; and resolutely, telling herself not to be hysterical, she curbed imagination. Remembering her wedding-day frame of mind, duplicating it, she decided—as the car, suburbia left behind, drew near and nearer to Aldford Street: "After all, he's my husband: we mustn't have any more misunderstandings. After all, he's honest, loyal, a clean man. He'd never cheat me, as Tony cheated. I mustn't cheat him . . . of the other Arthurs."

§ 2

Gerald was not at Aldford Street when she arrived; but Smithers told her that his secretary had telephoned to say he was already on his way and would be with her before six. The attention pleased her—more, perhaps, than his immediate presence would have pleased.

Responding, as he had responded, to the atmosphere of their disciplined home, she felt the need of preparing herself for him; went up to her bedroom; let Syrett take off her hat; bathed her face and arms; visited Arthur, dancing with joy at the prospect of again seeing his "Steppy"; cogitated a silent ten minutes by the tea-table in the green-and-gold morning-room; and had settled her plans some while before she heard his peremptory ring, the departing purr of the Armstrong-Siddeley.

"So the mechanism hasn't changed," she thought; and the thought, confirming—in the few seconds which intervened between his entering of the house and his entering of the morning-room—the certitude of Gerald's utter reliability, was like a warmth about her heart.

"I'm sorry to be late, Hermione. You didn't wait tea, I hope?"

"No. But it's still hot. Have some?"

"Thanks." He had not altered. She had not expected that he would alter. He did not kiss her. She had not expected that they would kiss. But the sight of him calmed her—as she had not expected that it would calm. The ratiocinations, the excitements of the past three hours disappeared from her brain.

She thought, taking the steady hand he gave her, releasing it, watching his long bulk settle itself into the accustomed chair by her tea-table, "I've been exaggerating things. Panicking!" She thought, passing him his tea, listening to the commonplaces of his conversation: "I'm glad he's the same Gerald."

They talked on, equably, of her journey to Town, of the arrangements he had made for the hunting-season, of the new work he had put in hand at Cosgrave. "I'll let that place for you before I've done with it," he said.

"Really?"

"Well—with any luck."

Cranston's face was a mask. His blue eyes, meeting hers across the silver tea-tray, betrayed no hint of the decision he had come to in her absence, no vaguest trace of the strange Cranston whom Angela had evoked in Paris.

Yet it was the new Cranston rather than the old who—their tea-drinking finished and the silver tray cleared away—countered her, "It's nice to be home. I'm sure I don't know why I stopped away so long," with an unexpected, "At least, the change has done you good. You look a different woman."

"You think so?" She flushed a little at his praise of her appearance.

"It's obvious. And Arthur? Has it done him good, too?"

"See for yourself, Gerald!" She grasped at the opportunity of shewing him how unjealous she was. "Ring the bell, and we'll have him down."

For a moment or so, Cranston hesitated. Then, deliberately, he pressed an ivory button in the panelling, and gave the answering footman his order.

Waiting for compliance with that order, he was surprised at his own emotions. Ever since entering the house, he had been thinking about Arthur rather than about Hermione. Against Hermione—he had realized the moment he set eyes on her—his heart felt steeled. Her presence could not even stir him to a renewal of anger. It was no use crying over the spill of that particular milk. Besides—a man of business, a man who had just received news that might easily mean the doubling of his fortune, could not indulge in domestic quarrels; could not afford that any woman, let alone his wife, should interfere with the orderliness of his mental processes. But against Arthur his heart was not steeled—Arthur was only a kid—Arthur loved him!

The footman returned with the message: "Mrs. Williams will bring Sir Arthur down in five minutes, sir." Continuing to wait, Cranston's thoughts renewed contemplation of his wife.

A man's wife, thank the Lord! was not like his mistress. With his wife, and more especially with a wife married on the understanding of his own marriage to Hermione, a man, save for certain reservations, could afford to be absolutely straight.

Hermione, moreover—said the new Cranston in him—would be only too glad to hear his decision, to be free from those duties to which she had always acquiesced so coldly.

Arthur's arrival, however, produced a thought-conflict. Sight of the child—the months had added to his height, the country air made him almost sturdy—recalled the old longings for his own children. Listening to the excited chatter—" Steppy, I's so glad to see you—Steppy, why didn't you come and bave in ve sea ? "—Cranston had a last impulse to compromise. Hermione need never know, would never know about Angela.

" Why didn't you come and see us ? " repeated Arthur.

" I'd my business to attend to, youngster."

Arthur's stepfather, still flirting with the idea of compromise, glanced at Hermione ; and Hermione, still deluding herself, misinterpreted his unspoken thought to, " We mustn't let the child know. We mustn't ever let him know that we quarrelled."

§ 3

Husband and wife played thus at cross-purposes till nurse returned for her reluctant charge.

" Don't want to go bye-bye," protested Arthur, clinging to his mother.

" No disobedience, youngster," commanded Cranston.

His impulse to compromise had disappeared. Nevertheless, looking at the wife who would henceforth be his only in name, at the clinging child who, even in name, was another's, he felt conscious of a strange discomfort. Since their last meeting, his feelings towards these two—he recognized suddenly—had undergone some peculiar change. It seemed as though the lens of his brain perceived each of them from a new angle, and in a softer light.

He discovered, to his surprise, that—about both of them—there was something rather pitiful : both, or so it appeared to him, being weaklings, dependent on his bounty. After the child had gone to bed, he caught himself thinking, " Poor Hermione ! She made rather a hash of things with Cosgrave. I'm glad that other business got itself over without any scandal. Even if they don't hit things off physically, a man oughtn't to let his wife down."

For physically, he imagined himself more than ever resolute. Beautiful though his new perceptions of beauty admitted her, mere decency forbade the slightest inclination to make that beauty his. Between him and it stood, and would always stand, the memory of Angela.

Dressing for dinner—it had been late when Hermione arrived, later still when Arthur finally consented to be removed—he remembered a miniature of herself which Angela had given him in Paris. The gold-framed oval in its leather case still lay where he had originally placed it—immediately after his return—on a shelf of the mahogany corner-cupboard over his dressing-table. "Better put that away," he thought, a little guiltily, as he tied his tie at the inclined mirror.

Before translating the thought into action, he had the impulse to open the case. Angela's face, as limned by the miniaturist, caused him neither pain nor pleasure. It seemed hardly credible that they should have been so intimate. He wondered, fleetingly, whether or no to destroy the thing, and, so wondering, experienced anew the feeling of guilt. Supposing Hermione were to find out?

The feeling, however, passed swiftly. Hermione could not find out. Even were she to do so, it would not affect any domestic issue.

Hiding the miniature in a drawer of his dressing-table, he told himself that, as far as his own emotional existence was concerned, both the woman in the leather case and the woman whom he could just hear moving about the next room, were dead. One he had loved; the other he had married. Neither—thank the Lord!—could worry him any further.

On his way down to dinner, self-control repeated, for the hundredth time during the last week, that Gerald Cranston of Pinner's Court was definitely and definitively through with the whole rag-tag and bobtail of femaledom.

§ 4

Meanwhile Hermione, attiring herself with Syrett's aid on the other side of the door which partitioned the conjugal apartments, had resumed cogitation of her plans.

In a way, the scene with Arthur had thrilled; in a way, chilled her. Watching Gerald at play with the child, she had found it a little difficult to repress the old jealousy. Arthur was hers, hers; his extravagant welcome to his stepfather a stab at the privileges of her maternity. Now, however, the jealousy seemed foolish—common-sense telling her how much Gerald's feeling for his step-son eased her own situation. "I shan't have to say much," she thought hopefully.

Joining him by the fire in the morning room, no suspicion that Gerald, in those eleven weeks of their separation, might

have even contemplated infidelity, crossed her mind. Nevertheless, in those few moments which preceded dinner, some instinct warned her of a change in him; made her wonder whether he were, indeed and unalterably, the old Gerald, the man who, proposing marriage to her, had specifically excluded the conventional motive for matrimony—love.

The instinct continued active while Smithers was announcing dinner; while they went in to it, side-by-side across the rug-strewn black-and-white tessellations of the pillared hall; while they were taking their places at the round clothless table in the centre of the oak-panelled dining-room. Catching sight of herself in one of the long blue-framed mirrors between the three windows whose heavy rose-coloured curtains concealed her Roman garden, she thought—satisfied with her dull green frock, cut low to reveal a square of slightly sun-tanned bosom, with the pearls at her throat, with the healthy colour of her lips and the new way in which Syrett had piled her dark hair: "I wonder how I'm appealing to him. I wonder if he's pleased to have me back."

The self-conscious instinct, however, passed with her first mouthful of food. "He *is* the same Gerald," she mused, doing her best to entertain him. "Everything's the same. I'm glad it should be so."

Yes. Everything in Aldford Street was the same. As her husband, so this room—her favourite in the house—had not altered. The four table-candles still carried the old identical rose-coloured shades. The electric lights, hidden in the cornice above the panelling, still refracted in the old identical way from the embellishments of the heavy ceiling. Not a single ornament—neither the two black Wedgwood vases on the mantelpiece, nor the Cromwellian clock, nor the three silver-gilt bowls on the Jacobean sideboard—had been shifted, by the fraction of an inch, from their old identical positions. The immutability of these material things pleased, re-assured her.

Their meal, perfect in its simplicity, went on—the two dish-carrying footmen moving deft and noiseless across the Persian prayer-carpets and the Austrian oak floor-boards; Smithers, with the napkin-wrapped champagne-bottle, hovering vigilant in the background. Eyeing Gerald's tawny head, as he sipped his Bollinger, Hermione thought, "Really, he *is* quite handsome."

Dinner came to an end; and Smithers, setting the cut-crystal brandy-decanter between them, asked, "Shall I bring coffee in here, or will your ladyship have it in the morning-room?" "We'll have it here," ordered Hermione; and—the coffee brought—continued her efforts to entertain.

"You really missed something at the Fotheringay's, Gerald," she said lightly. "Yesterday, when they shot Big Wood, four guns got two hundred and seventy brace."

"Pheasants or partridges?"

"Pheasants, of course! I told you they were shooting Big Wood."

"Sorry. I'm afraid I was wool-gathering. Two hundred and seventy brace is pretty useful. Who were the guns?"

She told him the names of the guns while he clipped and lit his cigar; persevered in her efforts to entertain him. But his "wool-gathering" had irritated her. Harking back to their conversation over dinner, she resented its one-sidedness.

"And you?" she asked, breaking off a pertinacious comment on the Fotheringay house-party. "What have you been doing with yourself all the time I've been away?"

"Working—as usual."

"All the time?"

"And over-time!" No flicker of the truth betrayed itself in her husband's blue eyes.

"Successfully, I hope?"

"More or less. Things aren't altogether smooth. This little stoppage has been a nuisance. I'll be glad when it's over."

"And how was Paris? Gay?"

The question, subconsciously expected ever since Hermione had entered the house, did not confuse Cranston. Yet for a second, that feeling of guilt he had experienced a while back, returned to him; for a second, he wondered whether, by any chance, she suspected. Her face, however, assured him that the question had been perfectly ingenuous; and, almost immediately, he returned the disingenuous answer: "Oh, Paris doesn't seem to have altered much."

"Did you meet anyone we know?"

"Nobody but Angela."

"Really? Was she there?" Hermione's remark displayed only a family interest.

"Yes." For another second, Cranston hesitated. "As a matter of fact, we went over in the same 'plane."

"'Plane!" Unconsciously, Gerald Cranston's lady began a wifely catechism. "You never told me you flew. What was it like? Exciting?"

"Not very." Self-consciously, the half-truths sticking in his throat, Cranston responded. "We had a bad ten minutes or so over the Channel."

"Didn't that frighten Cousin Angela?"

"Oh, she didn't take it too badly."

"I hope you looked after her properly?"

"As well as I could. She was all right by the time we got to Paris."

"And did she stay at the Meurice, too?"

"Yes. She's still there, I believe."

Cranston, to hide his growing discomfort, poured himself a second glass of brandy. Recognizing that he had been wise in his instant decision to tell Hermione that Angela had accompanied him to Paris (openness—with reservations—being the only card one could hope to play with safety) he nevertheless wished that he had not been forced into the admission about the Meurice. "Devilish awkward position," he thought; and, so thinking, realized, for the first time, by exactly how much he had transgressed, in private life, that code of straight dealing which was his religion in business. "Got to go through with things now, I suppose," continued his thoughts; and as Hermione, still the innocent, pursued her catechism, he went through with them faithfully enough—elaborating his description of the flight, giving the names of several restaurants where he and Angela had mealed together, omitting only, as in duty bound, any reference to Versailles.

"I wonder whether I ought to be jealous?" laughed his wife when he had finished. "Angela's not unattractive."

Obsessed by her own plans, Hermione dismissed Angela from the conversation; but the slight revelation of those plans which her last words had foreshadowed completed Cranston's discomfort. "The sooner she and I get things down to brass tacks," he mused, "the better."

All the same, when Hermione—deluding herself that now was the psychological moment—suggested their withdrawal to the morning-room, he knew himself irresolute. Already, his brain, regarding her from its new angle, began to perceive part of her purpose. Already, the enlarged knowledge of woman which he owed to Angela told him that she would not be content to let matrimonial matters rest where they had left them three months back.

And her next move—the move which opened, as he held the door for her to pass, "Gerald, you're not going to work to-night, are you?" and went on, "Because there are one or two things we really ought to discuss"—seemed to confirm his perceptions.

"Very well," he said quietly. "I'll just light another cigar and be with you in five minutes."

§ 5

The five minutes had lengthened to ten before Cranston left the dinner-table. Making his way across the hall, he began to resent his wife's presence, to yearn for the quiet of his sanctum, for the papers on his desk and that disciplined concentration which, for the last five days, had excluded all consideration of woman. "It's a lucky thing *she's* never pretended to care for you," said his imagination while he was slowly opening the door of the morning-room.

In the morning-room, only one soapstone-shaded lamp illuminated the dull green-and-gold of the panelling, the dull green of Hermione's dress as she stood, one foot on the cut-steel fender, staring into the bright fire, in front of which sedulous servants had drawn up their two deep chairs.

"You're sure you don't want to work?" she asked, turning to him.

"Not if you want to talk."

Cranston, more uncomfortable than ever, poured himself a glass of plain soda from the tray on the Chippendale table by the door of his sanctum; and pouring it, remembered the morning when she had counselled him to buy that particular piece. Things had altered since that morning—altered, it seemed to him in his discomfort, entirely for the worse.

"Have some?" he went on.

"No, thank you, Gerald."

Hermione arranged herself, dignified as ever, in one of the chairs before the fire. Looking down on her, Cranston's new perception of beauty knew her full attractions. This wife of his, this wife in name only, was not—the contrast outraged his decencies, yet somehow he could not avoid it—of the same mould as Angela. Her charms held more of nature, less of art, none of that pseudo-girlishness which had stimulated him in the other. She had poise, too—the repose of true breeding. He liked the seriousness, the maternal seriousness of the violet eyes under the square Rawley forehead.

But there was no love, no passion in his liking. The sight of her—of her bosom, rising and falling to the controlled breath, of her bared arms, of the whole strong yet delicate picture she made in the subdued lamp-light—only crystallized his determination. He wished suddenly that she were a man, that their talk were to be of business, that he could "come down to brass tacks", and discard finesse.

Cranston's face, however, continued to shew no sign of his

thoughts; and Hermione, watching him drain the soda in two quick gulps, still laboured under the over-dinner delusions. She had none of Angela's aptitudes, none of Angela's wisdom. "There's no need for finesse," she told herself. "He's the same immutable Gerald."

Nevertheless, for nearly a minute, she hesitated to put her plans into execution. Since Gerald was still Gerald—she thought—wouldn't it be better, wiser perhaps, to let the sleeping dog of their quarrel lie? One word, just before they went to bed, would be sufficient to shew him that, on her side, remained no rancour.

But from that solution her whole nature, her whole mentality still revolted. Her thoughts in the car had been—she felt—right thoughts, honest thoughts. To speak that word, and no other, would be just . . . beastliness. "I mustn't funk things," she decided; and, deliberately, began:—

"Gerald, I'm not a very good correspondent; and your letters haven't been exactly—encouraging. Not that I'm blaming you for them. Under the circumstances, you were perfectly justified. When I went away, or rather"—she smiled, a quiet reconciliatory smile—"when you sent me away——"

"Hermione," Cranston's interruption was not unkindly, "need we discuss that? Isn't it better to let bygones be bygones?"

"No. I don't think so. Bygones, you see"—the smile vanished from Hermione's lips—"are apt to influence the present. That's why I've made up my mind to tell you—somehow I couldn't write it—that, even before I went to Studley, I realized I was in the wrong about that wretched law case."

"The Sedgcumbe case?"

"Yes. I ought never to have spoken to you about it. Business, as you said at the time, is your affair and not mine."

"I'm glad you see things that way." Her little apology pleased; flattered the old power-lust in Cranston. His immediate impulse was to let her go on—as her face shewed him that she intended to go on; but, his new sensitiveness warning him whither such a conversation must inevitably tend, he did his best to break it off, adding, still equably, "Under the circumstances, we won't worry any more about them."

"But I *am* worrying about things," countered Hermione. "I've been worrying about them for weeks. The law case by itself was unimportant. If I hadn't lost my temper over it; if I hadn't said—what I did say—about——"

"About," Cranston, once more striving to turn the conver-

sation, fidgeted ever so slightly in his chair, "my not having been born a Rawley? Is that the trouble? Because if so, it needn't be. As far as I'm concerned——"

"Please, Gerald," Hermione, not to be gainsaid, held up a protesting hand, "please let me finish what I've got to say. It's kind of you to try and stop me, but," her breath came quickly, "but I don't want to be stopped. I've been away from you a long time, eleven weeks. And now that I've come back, I don't want us to have any more—misunderstandings. You see, our marriage isn't like the ordinary marriage. It isn't based, we neither of us ever meant it to be based, on"—hesitantly—"the usual convention. That's why, or at least so it seems to me, we've got to be so very open with one another; why I ought to have been more loyal in my thoughts about you, more careful about what I said. Gerald, it *was* a rotten thing to say. Forgive me for it. You do forgive me, don't you?"

"Of course." More stung by that word 'loyal' than he could yet realize, Cranston suddenly threw away his cigar; and rising, went on: "Don't say any more about it. After all, perhaps it's because I *wasn't* born a Rawley that I didn't understand what you were driving at when you first broached the subject of the Sedgcumbe case."

"Thank you, Gerald. I'm—I'm glad you've forgiven me." Hermione, looking up into her husband's calm face, felt as though she had cast off some intolerable burden. "I'm afraid I've been ungrateful to you. Terribly ungrateful. Forgive that, too. I never meant to be; any more than I ever meant to be disloyal. Even if our marriage isn't—isn't quite like the ordinary marriage, there's no reason why it shouldn't be—happy. Believe me, I—I want to make you happy. And there's no reason why I shouldn't. After all, a woman can't have everything; and love," a tremor shook her voice, "love's a very temporary business. I found that out when I found out about Tony."

She fell silent, expecting he would answer her. But for the moment her words, echo of the words she had spoken on their engagement-day, had smitten Cranston dumb. The new sensitiveness in him felt sorry for her, sorry for them both: because, inscrutably, the queer gods had decreed that each of them should have come through passion to knowledge of its futility. "She married you for Arthur's sake," said the new sensitiveness in him. "She's trying to do her duty by you. Have you done yours by her?" Then, the old Cranston brushing aside the new, he put away sensitiveness, thinking, "This is your chance of coming down to brass tacks—take it!"

Hermione, her planned apology at an end, had averted her eyes from his. Imagination, painting pictures in the fire, jangled her nerves anew. Panicked, she asked herself whether the apology had been necessary, whether—when he took advantage of it—she would regret. "I don't love him," she mused. "I can't ever love him. Nor he, me. How can we be happy with one another, loyal to one another, without love?"

"Everything you say is true"—her husband's voice, quiet yet purposeful, cut the thread of Hermione's musings. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be—happy. So long as we're open with one another. And it's always difficult to be open by letter. You were right when you said I sent you away. I oughtn't to have done it. Forgive me! I, too, lost my temper. But that's over. The thing's washed out, done with. In a marriage such as ours, it ought never to have occurred. Forget it; and let us consider the future. After all, we're two sensible people. We didn't marry blindly, for"—he hesitated as she had done—"the usual reason."

Cranston, fumbling for words, paused. Something in his tone had frightened Hermione. Now, looking up from the fire, something in his eyes frightened her yet more. "Gerald," she faltered. "Gerald—what are you trying to tell me?"

"Only this"—for all the old Cranston's many resolutions, the new Cranston, suddenly fearful of hurting his wife's pride, begged the question—"that I realize, that I've been realizing ever since you went away, the essential difficulties of our marriage. Perhaps—pardon me the crudity—I was wrong to persuade you into it. You see," the lie, once launched, came fluently enough, "when I persuaded you to marry me, I didn't understand—frankly, as a man, it never struck me—that certain aspects of matrimony would be quite so repugnant to your temperament."

"Repugnant!" The justice of the word choked Hermione; and for a long while, torn between the wish to give it the lie and the impulse to admit its truth, she sat silent, unable, unwilling perhaps, to realize that he was imparting a decision to her; till at last, awkwardly, moved by a strange tenderness, Gerald put out a hand, laid it on her shoulder, and, feeling her tremble ever so slightly at his touch, added, "Yes. Repugnant. Why not admit it?"

Cranston's hand withdrew; but Cranston's wife, rising slowly to face this new Gerald, still found no answer for him. The sudden caress of this new Gerald's hand, the unexpected delicacy of his thought, paralyzed her every faculty. Almost, at that

moment—for the very pity which had prevented his "coming down to brass tacks" disarmed her of suspicion—it was in her to say: "I won't admit it. You're not repugnant to me."

But, in that paralysis of her faculties, neither lips nor fingers seemed her own. They might have been another woman's. Her brain could not move them. She could only stand—stand like a wax-work figure—staring and staring at this new Gerald. Finally, as from a great distance, she heard his voice.

"It's about bed-time, isn't it?" he said quietly. "You must have had a tiring day."

She answered the voice, "Yes. It was rather tiring"; held out her hand. Her brain still seemed paralyzed; incapable of any comprehension. The automatic movement of lips and fingers bewildered her. She felt all bewildered—by her fears; by her desires; by the duty which bade her deny, somehow, anyhow, that just and terrible word.

Then their hands met; and she heard someone she could scarcely realize herself say: "Syrett's waiting up for me. *Au revoir! Au revoir*, Gerald."

§ 6

All the while Syrett was undressing her, beautifying her, brushing and re-brushing her waist-length hair, straightening the satin eiderdown on the big satinwood bed, straightening the écru curtains at the long double windows, Hermione's bewilderment endured. "What was it that I said?" ran her thoughts. "What was it that I said to Gerald?"

Syrett tucked her into bed; said, "Good-night, your ladyship"; went out, closing the door softly. She heard Gerald come upstairs; heard his door open and shut; heard him moving here and there about his room—and understood, suddenly, startlingly, the significance of the thing she had said to him. "It was my duty," ran her thoughts. "My duty!"

But at that, the tiniest shudder of revulsion prickled her skin. She reminded herself of Tony; and the reminder was all one shame. . . . Something cried out in her: "You should have admitted—admitted that just and terrible word." She wanted to cry out: "You mustn't—you mustn't come in to me." But she could not cry out: she could only wait on his coming—wait, tense and cold under the cold bed-clothes, for his knock, for the turn of the door-handle.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. She could still hear him moving about his room. Fifteen minutes passed. His

movements ceased. . . Yet no knock came, no turn of the door-handle.

Supposing, supposing that *he* had not understood the significance of the thing she had said to him?

Another minute passed. Revulsion dwindled. Re-acting from it, she knew relief—then fear. . . . Supposing, supposing that, having understood, he did not come in to her. Would that mean more shame, another betrayal? . . . Surely not. . . And besides, surely he would come in.

Three more minutes passed. Then, terribly distinct, Gerald Cranston's lady heard, from beyond the door, the rustle of bed-clothes, the click of a switched-off light.

Staring at the curtain over the door, she thought: "He *must* have understood. He doesn't want me. Why? Why?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

§ 1

"HE doesn't want me. Why?" Vainly, during those peculiar weeks which followed her attempt at reconciliation, Hermione Cranston's mind repeated that question.

Rising, the morning after her return, from a slumber troubled by strange dreams, she dismissed as fantastic those momentary doubts of Gerald's fidelity with which his unexpected abstinence had inspired her animal instincts. And even when that abstinence prolonged itself, Reason, experience, all her knowledge of this second husband conspired to tell her that he was not as her first husband; that he was an ascetic, a Puritan, a devotee to the monkish gods of business.

For quite a while, too, his prolonged abstinence suited her mood. For quite a while, the word 'repugnant' rang true enough. Seen in retrospect—she knew—there *had* been repugnance in all her occasional surrenders.

Gradually, however—goaded by the constant prick of that 'Why?'—even Hermione's inexperience began to perceive two possibilities: either that her previous judgments of Gerald had been hopelessly inadequate; or else that some fundamental in his character had completely altered since their separation.

Gerald—she began to perceive—was very far from being the fleshless, bloodless image of her primal imaginings—a machine driven only by the boiler-fires of duty and self-discipline. He possessed, for instance, or at least had come into possession of, a surprising delicacy, a surprising tenderness. Witness, now, that laying of his hand on her shoulder when he had communicated his temporary decision.

For of course—said the animal instincts in Hermione—Gerald's decision *was* temporary, a mere phase in their relationship: one night, any night, he would come to claim his rights as a husband.

But though a week went by, and a fortnight; though they

re-opened Studley in time for the Kirby Gate meet of the Quorn; though, in all things save one, life resumed itself as heretofore, the claiming of those rights tarried: till, willy-nilly, she realized that Gerald's decision must be permanent.

And with that realization, her mood changed. Her pride began to resent his abstinence; to feel hurt at his denial of her beauty. She did not actually want him; yet the fact that he did not want her rankled. Once even, one evening a few days after KirbyGate, when she sat alone with him in the little drawing-room at Studley, it was as though some secret woman in her cried out, "But he must want you, he must. You've only to give him a lead——"

Pride, needless to say, exorcised the secret woman; and for the best part of another week, Gerald Cranston's lady succeeded in telling herself: "But I don't want *him*. I don't want any man. I never have wanted any man since Tony. I'm content, content that things should be as they are."

Nevertheless, subconsciously always and consciously far more often than she cared to admit, Hermione continued resentful; and, continuing resentful, again became vaguely jealous.

And since from jealousy to suspicion is only one backward step, her mind presently completed its vicious circle, returning to those doubts, those suspicions which it had started by dismissing for fantastic.

By the end of November, moreover, those doubts, those suspicions were no longer purely animal. Reason, at first the scoffer, began slowly to approve them. Gerald—decided Reason—though temperamentally the Puritan, was a man like other men—altogether normal, altogether healthy. Why, then, the abstention? Why the delicacy with which he had imparted his extraordinary decision to abstain? Why the fundamental character-change of which that delicacy was only one symptom? Why this? Why that? Why the other? Why, more particularly, Gerald's sudden realization that, physically, he had hitherto been repugnant to her?

Eventually, however, abruptly, reasonlessly, as the anniversary of their wedding drew nearer, Reason petered out, and her suspicions with it. Still prey to the love of her subconscious seeking, she informed herself that she had once more been disloyal; that Gerald's new delicacy, Gerald's complete monasticism and Gerald's sudden realization of his own repugnance to her only proved the depth of his respect for her; only proved, beyond all shadow of a doubt, that he was one of Nature's noblemen, and as such, regretful of the bargain his money had forced on her;

only proved, in fine, that he was beginning to care for her too much to insist on unwilling surrenders.

Which information startled her clean out of the introspective moods into a crisis of excitement during which she could hardly sleep or eat for wondering how she should deal with Gerald's passion if and when that passion declared itself.

"Will he still be repugnant," she wondered, "or shall I be glad of him?"

For still there was no true humility in this woman—only pride, craving not to love but to be loved, not to give but to receive.

§ 2

Meanwhile in Cranston, too, were cravings: strange desires which—as the peculiar weeks went by—puzzled him by their growing vehemence.

At first, he only blamed himself for his lack of resolution in begging Hermione's direct, "Gerald, what are you trying to tell me?"; for his cowardice in not "coming down to brass tacks." At first, the whole memory of his behaviour appeared so utterly unlike the imparting of a definite decision, so dangerously like an anæmic form of love-making, that it re-aroused every dread of woman from which he had ever suffered. "I was weak," he thought, "weak. And in weakness towards woman lies destruction."

For quite a while, too, those dreads increasing, his re-action from femaledom remained the most compelling force in him. For quite a while, though his new perception of beauty made his animal instincts increasingly aware of Hermione's physical attractions, he stalled off those instincts by telling himself that this woman he had married did not love him, never had loved him, had only consented to a repugnant bargain for the sake of her own material convenience.

Gradually, however, as the re-action Angela had set up in him over-passed its zenith, his dreads subsided; and he dared to contemplate, though not without perturbation, the matrimonial future. Still very resolute against any return to intimacy with his wife—for in him, also, was as yet no humility, no realization of his sins against her—he was already wondering, by the time the hunting-season opened, whether his decision had been altogether wise. With his baronetcy practically assured for the New Year, it certainly did seem ridiculous that he should remain, and by his own decree, childless.

Gradually, too, the paternity-lust sharpening, he began to

pat himself on the back for the tactfulness with which he had over-skated, and was still over-skating, the ice of his domestic difficulties ; to be very glad that no actual scandal had resulted, or could result, from the episode with Angela. Angela—his shibboleth repeated—had suited him ; and that was all.

But the shibboleth, somehow or other, no longer passed Cranston across his Jordan. Angela, casually though she had thrown him over, had been no casual woman—bought and forgotten. She—even now his pulse quickened a beat at the thought of her—had at least made sacrifices, run risks, dared dangers for him. She—even then he had been half aware of it—had given him more than she received ; taught him some sex-lesson of which, mysteriously, every passing day enhanced the value. The episode of her might be forgotten—yet the influence of her lesson endured.

And it was that influence—deny it, fight against it, misunderstand it as he might—which kept on assuring Cranston of some radical change in his outlook towards the woman who had married him for his money, of some need for tenderness, almost for chivalry in all his dealings with her.

§ 3

Fortunately, though—or so it seemed to the puzzled husband—the influence of Angela's lesson did not extend beyond Aldford Street. His business-outlook, unlike his sex-outlook, had undergone no change. Cranston of Pinner's Court, Cranston of Cranston's remained—thank the Lord !—unaltered, his faculties as active, his judgment as sound, his brain the same wondrous locomotive whose wheels, released from their raffle of fluff and chiffon, hauled the train of good fortune swift and swifter along the permanent track.

For, by the end of October, the permanent track was again clear. The coal-stoppage, faithful to his predictions, fizzled out. Paid politicians and paid delegates " explored " the usual " avenues " ; discovered the usual half-way house of compromise. Work at the pits, still under Government control ; the work of distribution, apparently under no control whatever, resumed itself.

" Go on ! " said Gerald Cranston to his keen Northumbrian.

And Sandeman went on. Daily, the Red-and-Black fleet added to its numbers. Daily, its lorries with their legend, " Cranston's Coals from Colliery to Consumer ", carried bannerwise above their bulging sacks, penetrated deep and deeper into

that maze of streets which is London. Daily, the new accounts rolled in and old accounts were enlarged.

Then Sandeman, calling experts to his aid, persuaded his capitalist to newspaper advertisement—modestly at first, in quarter-double columns here and quarter-double columns there; afterwards, as the quarter-doubles with their slogan, "If it's Coal, it must be Cranston's", began to pull, in half-doubles and doubles. They postered the slogan, too, postered it in red-and-black from Balham to Bermondsey—and the Bank loan touched a hundred and fifteen thousand.

"Never mind the money," said Gerald Cranston. "Establish the business. Get it known. Hammer it home to the public."

And Sandeman hammered it home to the public, saying: "Mark my words, Mr. Cranston, when the slump in household comes, we'll be one of the few pits that'll weather it."

For that winter, 1920, the Great Slump—the slump which Cranston's over-confidence had too long derided—already loomed, a business-cloud with lightnings in its womb, from horizon to horizon. Already, Banks were calling in their weaker loans; factories closing down; unemployment spreading. Already—ominous sign!—Gilt-edged Securities rose and Industrials fell.

But as yet, the slump had hardly touched Cranston's, Limited. Their shares—thank the Lord!—were sound, sound as all the bells. Even if Cranston's private gambles, the outside gambles in produce or the Exchanges which had once been so profitable, were profitable no longer; even if, losing a thousand here, losing a couple of thousand there, he had to cut his little losses to avoid greater—what did little losses (or even substantial ones) matter, when behind him—as a staker behind a poker-player—stood the great money-giant Coal, and behind Coal, a greater money-giant yet, the Tin of Marankari?

Tin! Marankari! The Great Lode! How often, during those peculiar weeks which followed Hermione's return, Cranston's imagination—discarding the actual—used to dwell on their possibilities; used to visualize, not the luxurious quiet of Aldford Street, not the busy coal-office on Copthall Avenue, not his bare sanctum at Pinner's Court or his mother's knick-knack crowded parlour at Phillimore Gardens—but a bell-tent, a lonely sun-beaten bell-tent set for an outpost of financial empire by a desolate creek among the arid uplands of Northern Nigeria.

All about those uplands—it seemed to Cranston's imagination—savages, naked arm-ringed tribesmen from Vom and

Mianga and Ibi and all Hausa-land, were digging, digging away the overburden above the vertical lode which should turn his ten thousand pounds into a hundred thousand, and the hundred thousand (why not ?) into the first million of his coveting. Down in the creek, too, tribesmen were digging, digging the dam for the Great Lode's water-power. While in and out among the tribesmen, now at the creek and now on the slopes above it, his sun-hat on his head and his spine-pad at his back, his shorted legs straggling his short-legged pony, rode the dweller in the bell-tent, the man, Gordon Ibbotsleigh, whom he, Gerald Cranston, had fee'd for the doubling of his fortune.

Once, too—as it happened, on the very night when he and Rorkton, long returned from his holidays, sat late in the bare shabby library at Great Cumberland Place, to scrutinize the report promised in Ibbotsleigh's cable—it struck the imaginative faculty in Cranston as curious that the man in the bell-tent, the man whose every cautious sentence seemed to foreshadow money beyond even *his* dreams, should be the very man who had introduced him to Hermione. And once—on the night when, after some trivial function, he stood late with Hermione before the fire in the morning room—his memory tried, very vaguely, to recall a scrap of forgotten knowledge about that man, an intuition which had come to him, almost a year back now, as he stood waiting for his bride on the chancel-steps of St. Margaret's.

But the intuitive knowledge was gone beyond recall. The ever-moving film of memory had carried it away, stored it and lost it in some secret chamber of his mind. He remembered only his second judgment, the decision come to at Studley, " Got brains—that fellow " ; and on receipt of yet another cable, " Year's ore in sight. Mailing specifications for required machinery ", prepared to back that judgment to the ultimate limit.

§ 4

And yet, neither his growing excitement about Marankari, nor the constantly increasing activities of the Red-and-Black fleet, nor the thousand-and-one other pre-occupations of Gerald Cranston, capitalist, quite succeeded in solving the puzzles of Gerald Cranston, husband. Always, as his perception of Hermione's beauty grew keener and keener ; always, as the paternity-lust in him sharpened and sharpened with every sight of Arthur, his instincts urged him towards compromise, towards a renewal of the old connubial routine.

So that when—one Saturday afternoon while they sat waiting

for Hermione's return from a matinée, in the little library at Aldford Street—his mother abruptly reminded him, "Gerry, Tuesday will be the anniversary of your wedding-day: isn't it about time you presented me with my first grandchild?" he hardly knew how to answer her.

"I'm making a fool of myself," he thought. "I'm taking all this business about women too seriously."

All the same, his dignity—his better nature, too!—held firm against temptation. To ask Hermione's favours without telling her about Angela, would be—he felt—indecent; to tell her about Angela, impossible.

"I'm pinched in a cleft stick," continued his thoughts; and the cleft in the stick pinched tighter than ever when, his wife appearing, the "old lady" went on: "And what is Gerry giving you for Tuesday, my dear?"

Hermione burked the question; but all through the week-end, it rankled in Cranston's mind. His wife—confound these women!—would undoubtedly expect some tangible reminder of their wedding-day. Jewels, of course! And he did not want to give her jewels. Jewels—oh Hades, these women!—smacked too much of Angela.

In the end, however—late on Monday afternoon—he dashed into Hunt and Roskell's; and, gruffly brushing aside all suggestions of rings or bracelets, bought (and paid in notes for) a diamond pendant on the thinnest of platinum chains, which, with a hastily scribbled note suggesting that "perhaps she might like to dine with him at Claridge's and do a theatre afterwards," he sent up next morning, just as he was leaving for the City, to Hermione's bedroom.

§ 5

Gerald Cranston's lady—she had been wondering, ever since Saturday, why he had made no more mention of the anniversary—received that letter, opened it, and opened the accompanying jewel-case as she sipped her early tea. The words of the letter set her heart strangely athrob. The sight of the diamonds sent a flush to her cheeks. "He's the strangest man," she thought, sitting upright between her lace-edged pillows to slip the thin chain over her head.

The simplicity of the pendant—three stones set "open" on a platinum bar—pleased her; and for quite ten minutes she kept it round her neck. Then, taking it off, she put it back in its case; and, ringing for Syrett, told her to put it away in her jewel-safe.

"I'll wear it to-night," she instructed the admiring maid. "And you can get me my bath."

Then she lay back against her pillows; and relapsed into thought. The present—and more even than the present, Gerald's letter—fired her excitement to fever-point. Glancing here and there about the luxurious room, all her pulses began to beat.

"To-night!" whispered the secret woman in her. "To-night! You've only to give him a lead." And the secret woman was glad: she rejoiced in the thought. But the flesh-and-blood woman, the Earl's daughter and the baronet's widow, was not glad. Her hurt pride demanded explanations, demanded that some sacrifice other than diamonds be strown on the conjugal altars. "Why doesn't this explain, beg, demand even?" asked the flesh-and-blood woman, clutching her husband's letter.

The Louis Quinze clock struck nine before Hermione rose; ten while, hatless, in the simplest of dark house-gowns, she still pottered, Syrett in attendance, about her bedroom. All that hour, her thoughts had continued febrile, dithery, unsettled. And her thoughts were still dithery. She could not make up her mind to obey the secret woman's advice. Anticipation of her evening with Gerald made her curiously shy. She dared not look forward to it.

Syrett reminded her of the time; reminded her of an appointment. She told Syrett to telephone off the appointment; continued her aimless pottering. To-day, she had no inclination for appointments; for the usual pretence of domestic duties—the three-minute interview with the housekeeper, the five-minute interview with the chef; for the usual pretence of exercise—her walk in the Park. Besides—it was raining; a dreadful day; high winds blowing; rain lashing down through the wind-gusts against her double windows.

The wind, the rain, added to her excitement. Memory—active for a second—recalled the weather of a year back, the foggy dawn creeping through the worn curtains at Great Cumberland Place, the frost, the sunshine which had greeted her as she stepped into her father's hired car to drive to the wedding. "Safe," she thought, her eyes on the rain beyond the windows. "Safe!"

Yes—she and Arthur were safe. Whatever storms blew, Gerald and Gerald's money had secured them for all time against worn curtains, and hired cars, and all the comparative discomforts of comparative poverty. "I mustn't be ungrateful," she thought; and, blushing, "But must I give him his lead?"

Syrett came back: the appointment had been cancelled,

"Mr. Reville hopes your ladyship will come in during the afternoon—and does your ladyship wish to give any orders about dinner?"

"No." Hermione spoke slowly. "Tell Antoine we shall be dining out. And Syrett——"

"Your ladyship?"

"I've changed my mind about the pendant. Get it for me, will you?"

The servant obeyed; and Hermione, slipping the chain—Gerald's chain!—once more over her head, inspected herself at the triple mirror on the dressing-table.

Inspecting herself, she was conscious of decision. The three jewels—Gerald's jewels!—flashing brilliant against the dark blue satin of her dress, seemed to hypnotize her. "I've misjudged him," ran her thoughts; "been cold to him, unkind, ungrateful, snobbish."

Self-absorbed, she hardly noticed Syrett go out to give her message to the chef; hardly heard the noise of drawers opening and shutting in the room beyond.

Gradually, however, the noise penetrated her self-absorption. Gradually, she recognized that Rennie must be putting away Gerald's clothes; and that her son—a habit of his—must be with Rennie. Every now and then, despite the thickness of the wall between, her ears caught the muffled sound of Arthur's excited voice.

For a moment, she thought to leave the pair alone. Since the weather was so bad, Arthur might just as well amuse himself with Rennie as with Nurse. But as the muffled sounds grew louder, she changed her mind; and, leaving the mirror, went slowly out of her room into the steam-heated corridor.

The outer door of Gerald's room stood just ajar: so that the voices of the valet and the child carried clearly. Rennie, apparently, was having a field-day among Gerald's clothes; and Arthur, obviously, watching the process. She heard the shrill treble, "Let me put on ve wed coat, Wennie. Let me put on ve wed coat"; and again hesitated to disturb her child's fun.

Then, all of a sudden, Rennie began to scold, as even the best of servants will sometimes scold children, in dour forthright Scotch, "Put yon back in its place, Sir Arthur—or I'll tell the master of you"; and without more ado, Hermione pushed open the door and walked in.

Immediately, instinct—or mayhap Rennie's perturbed face—warned her of something wrong. Immediately—on that first quick glance round the plain white-painted walls, at the simple

mahogany furniture and the brass bed piled high with her husband's hunting-kit—she saw what had set the valet scolding. The top drawer in Gerald's dressing-table was open. By it, laughing, defiant, stood her son. One of his little hands clutched a flat leather case; the other, some trinket. Startled at her sudden entrance, he dropped the case; and came rushing across the room. "Mummy," he stammered, holding up the trinket, "Mummy, isn't it inciting? Wennie and I were tidying up Steppy's things, and look, just look what I founded."

Reaching down for that golden trinket, Hermione was aware —mainly—of Rennie's eyes. It seemed to her that there was conflict in those eyes, apprehension, a medley of emotions she could not analyze. Almost it seemed as though Rennie were making up his mind to come between her and her son, to snatch the trinket from Arthur's hands. Then, taking the thing, she began to understand.

The gold trinket held a miniature, a miniature of some woman. She told herself not to look at it; not to let Rennie see that she had begun to understand. But at the very touch of the gold, a tight band seemed to constrict itself about her heart.

Then Arthur shrilled, "Mummy, Mummy, look at it. Don't you know who it is? It's Aunty Angela"—and suddenly she knew herself stifling; knew the room, the miniature, Arthur's face, Rennie's face, swimming before her eyes. Again she told herself, "Don't look at the thing. Don't make a fuss. You mustn't let Rennie see that you understand."

The room still swam; but already she had herself under control. The fingers of her right hand were clenched round the trinket; but her left hand caressed Arthur's curls without a tremor as—her lips curved somehow to a smile—she answered him:—

"Really? That *is* exciting. But now, dear, you must run along to Nannie."

"Why?" The child's face fell; angered. "I don't want to go to Nannie. I want to stop wiv Wennie."

"Very well, then. Rennie shall take you to Nannie." Hermione, one hand still on the curly head, turned to Gerald's Scotsman. The eyes of Gerald's Scotsman were once more the eyes of the man-servant, dutiful. They told her nothing. She said to them, "Please take Sir Arthur upstairs, Rennie. He mustn't be allowed to interfere with your work."

The man-servant answered her: "Thank you, your ladyship"; and a moment afterwards, she found herself alone.

The room had ceased to swim before her eyes. Everything

in it had gone still, deadly and horribly still. Her face, seen in the mirrored front of the closed wardrobe, moved never a muscle. She saw that it was white, unnaturally white. Biting her lips, she went out of the room ; went downstairs ; went to her boudoir.

Her fingers were still clenched round the miniature. She unclenched them ; forced herself to look on the beautiful painted face. " Angela," she thought. " It *is* Angela." Every muscle in her went taut. She had an impulse to fling the thing from her, to fling it on the fire. She tried to say to herself : " Why shouldn't it be Angela ? Why shouldn't she give him her photograph ? "

But the thing wasn't a photograph : it was a miniature, a miniature on ivory. And besides, Rennie's scolding of Arthur ! Rennie's face ! Rennie knew something. Servants always did know—that sort of horror.

She looked at the face again. The features of it hardly seemed Angela's. Angela wasn't so—so beautiful as all that. Gerald, Gerald couldn't have—— Couldn't he ? She remembered, with a ghastly distinctness, his hesitation when she had questioned him about Paris, his letters before he went to Paris ; remembered something that someone—wasn't it Ibbotsleigh ?—had said to her about Angela. " She's not like the rest of you—she's a *grande amoureuse.*"

Hermione's hand began to shake ; the trinket slipped from it, fell face-downwards on the carpet. She picked it up ; put it away.

" *Grande amoureuse !* " But Angela was a Rawley. Angela wouldn't demean herself. But why hadn't Angela come back from Paris ? Why, since Paris, hadn't Gerald—— ? Her brain seethed—seethed with unanswerable questions. Why unanswerable ? Any fool could answer those questions. The horror was proved—proved to the hilt by Rennie's eyes and Gerald's abstinence. She had been betrayed, betrayed for the second time, betrayed by Gerald with a woman of her own blood.

§ 6

For a long while, pacing restless about the boudoir, Hermione Cranston knew herself incapable of further thought. Her brain felt frozen. No purposes came to it—only memories, memories of that other betrayal, of Tony. Tony, Gerald, all men were beasts, liars, lechers. She hated them ; hated herself for having yielded her body to their lechery.

Her pacing brought her to the mirror over the fireplace. She looked at herself ; saw herself haggard ; saw the diamonds at

her breast, the chain—Gerald's chain!—round her neck. All men were lechers. And she—she, a Rawley, had prostituted herself to Gerald's lechery; had contemplated—nay, decided on—a renewal of the prostitution. God!

Shame took her by both breasts; rage by the throat. In the mirror, she saw her haggard face go red; saw her mouth opening—opening and shutting. The chain—Gerald's chain!—was choking her. She felt it like a noose round her neck.

She tried to unclasp the chain; but her fingers shook at her nape. She heard herself muttering, "Prostitute. His prostitute." She felt the chain burning her fingers, burning the skin of her neck; wrenched at it; wrenched again; felt it cutting into her flesh; tore at it; snapped it; flung the diamonds from her; stamped on them, stamped them under her thin-shod feet.

Presently her brain unfroze. It was no longer ice. It was ice and fire. Purposes came to it—cold purposes of pride, hot purposes of rage. She gathered up the trampled pendant; locked it away with the miniature; rang; gave orders; went to her bedroom; had herself dressed; and went out—out into the wind and the rain.

She needed to think, to make plans. And she could not think, could not make plans, there, in the house where she had prostituted herself to lechery.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

§ 1

THE day at Pinner's Court had been long, arduous ; and Cranston —as his Armstrong-Siddeley left the congested traffic of the Bank behind it and put on speed along Queen Victoria Street for the Embankment—felt the wheels of his brain run down ; stop. He felt weary of brain-work, a little weary of the unceasing routine whose sole purpose was money. " To-day's Tuesday," he thought. " On Friday, I'll slip up to Studley, take a day with the hounds."

But the prospect of hunting stirred never a pulse in him. That, too, was routine. And he needed something beyond routine, some pleasure akin to the pleasures he had known in Paris.

Rigorously, he put away all memory of Paris, of all those pagan delights into which he had been Angela's initiate. Angela, with every single desire that her beauty had loosed in him, was dead. He had trampled on passion—trampled it forever under his heel. Curse passion ! Curse Angela ! Had it not been for her, his life-plan might even now be succeeding, his wife with child.

The thought weakened him. Since his passions were dead, since there could be no fear of scandal resulting from them, why shouldn't he go back to the life of his planning, to the love-denying self-disciplined routine of connubial intimacy ? Hermione—Hermione might not have loved, yet she had always submitted.

Cranston's car hurried on ; hurried out of the Embankment, up Northumberland Avenue, into Trafalgar Square. The traffic was blocked at Trafalgar Square ; and memory, casting back the full year, reminded him of another delay, in the self-same spot. He had been in the Rolls, then ; on his way to St. Margaret's. The block thickened ; and his memories with it. Almost he could hear his brother's anxious growl, " Curse it ! We're going to be late " ; his own calm reply, " Don't be such a fool, Harry. There's oceans of time."

"Funny!" he thought. For the Cranston of a year back was not the Cranston of to-day. Between them, stood a thousand experiences, self-knowledges, desires, dissatisfactions. Or could it be only one experience, one morsel of self-knowledge, one desire, one dissatisfaction?

The block broke; Havers solved his way out of it; the car moved forward; gathered speed again. But Cranston's brain solved no way out of its questions, gathered no speed. He kept asking himself—as they shot on, up the Haymarket, for the flashing lights of Piccadilly—why he was no longer the old Cranston, what had changed him, how he had changed, why he should be weary, why dissatisfied.

Materially, there was so little to dissatisfy. Discipline, as always, had won him what he wanted—a splendid home, a wife from the peerage, the prospect of a title. Despite his outside losses, he had grown no poorer. On the contrary! What with his coal, with his tin, he stood to be a millionaire. Yet millionairedom—he realized suddenly—would add nothing to his capital of pleasure. Only from the acquirement of money, not from the actual possession of it, could he any longer extract happiness. For what constituted happiness? Novelty, perhaps!

Cranston's memory cast further back, to the older years—to the times before his marriage, to the times before War. He had been a poor man, then, a fighter against odds, inadequately munitioned. Yet a joyful fighter, his every nerve thrilling to the great game of Money. There had been joy, too, in the actual money, in possessing it, in getting rid of it. In those days, the banking of a hundred pounds had been a triumph, the spending of twenty an event. Whereas to-day—to-day, the banking of money, as the withdrawing of it, had become a meaningless routine. The spending of money, the very things one's money bought, held no quality of pleasure. One had no luxuries—because the luxuries of the older years were become the necessities of the new. One could even buy—given but the resolution—a wife to bear one's children

But at that, memory ceased its casting; and as—Piccadilly sparkling behind—the Armstrong-Siddeley rounded Regent Street to swing left-handed through Hanover Square, Cranston's mind snapped back to the present. Money was Power—and that power his. Life—the life of his disciplined planning—lacked only one prize, the prize of his unborn children. In the lack of that prize, and in the lack of no other, lay all dissatisfactions.

Yet even so, he knew himself still irresolute to demand sub-

mission from one who had never acknowledged, even in her surrenders, that emotion which he himself had always feared, despised, rejected—that complex emotion which is called Love.

§ 2

It never struck Hermione's husband, crossing the threshold of his disciplined home, that any cog in the domestic machinery could have slipped. The faces of his footmen betrayed nothing beyond the usual deference. Even Smithers' appearance with the message, " Her ladyship is in the boudoir, sir, and would be very glad if you could spare her a few minutes before you go to your study," conveyed no warning to him.

Washing his hands, brushing his hair in the downstairs cloak-room ; striding deliberately up the broad oak-balustered staircase, across the big square first-floor landing, past the closed doors of the drawing-room and the music-room, he had no premonition of evil. The very unusualness of Hermione's request seemed foretaste of a pleasant evening. " She wants to thank me for that gew-gaw," he thought, as he set his fingers to the door-handle ; opened, and walked in.

Even then—even though, at the sound of his approach, Hermione had risen from her chair and was standing rigid, her face white with suppressed rage, against the rose damask of the wall between the long rose-curtained windows—Cranston did not perceive catastrophe.

" Smithers gave me your message, you see," he said, closing the door behind him, and walking towards the fire. " Not that it was necessary. I didn't intend to work before dinner."

Hermione did not answer ; and turning from the fire, he saw that she had shrunk away before his coming till her shoulders almost touched the silk of the wall. She was all in black, jewelless—her right hand behind her back ; her left clenched at her side. The top of her walnut bureau lay open—as though she had been writing letters. Automatically, his instincts began to sense trouble.

" Anything the matter ? " he asked.

Still, she made no answer ; only shrank from him. The pupils of her eyes were enormous, the violets of them almost black. Her nostrils quivered. The Adam's apple shewed hard under the skin of her throat. Immediately, every perception in him leaped to knowledge of her anger.

" Anything the matter ? " he repeated.

" No." Hermione's teeth bit savage on the under-lip.

The knuckles of her clenched hand told him of her fight for self-control. " I only sent for you to say that I should not be dining with you to-night."

" Why not ? "

" Is it necessary for you to ask ? "

For several seconds they faced one another in absolute silence ; and curiously, during that silence—though now every bell in his brain rang " Danger ! She's found out—she's found out about Angela "—Cranston realized himself more than ever conscious of his wife's beauty. Also, watching her, white-faced and resolute against that rose-silk background, he was aware—perhaps for the first time—of her individuality, of the pride that matched his own.

" Would you mind explaining yourself ? " he asked.

" I'd far rather not."

Her stubbornness—the very recognition of her individuality—loosed the power-lust in him. Yearning to dominate her, he forgot discretion.

" I insist," he went on.

" By what right ? "

The venom behind her speech, proving the correctness of his intuition, took him aback. He remembered, suddenly, that it was his duty to defend Angela, to shield her. Easy enough, that ! Provided he kept his head. After all, Hermione could have no proof.

" By every right," he answered slowly.

His deliberateness unpent her rage. He saw the white cheeks flame, the eyes dart fire. And again, conscious of her proud beauty, he yearned to dominate it.

" Rights," she sneered. " I imagined you *had* rights when I—when I apologized to you for *my*," the word choked her, " disloyalty. You must have thought me a pretty fool."

" My dear girl," Cranston's voice was the voice of the poker-table, " what *are* you talking about ? "

" Loyalty "—she hurled the syllables in his face. " Not mine to you—but yours, to me."

" And since when "—he frowned, for this time the word had more than stung—" have I been disloyal to you ? "

" You needn't lie about it "—he could see her shoulders shaking, see the Adam's apple prominent as a man's in her throat—" you needn't go on playing the hypocrite."

" Hypocrite ? " Cranston frowned again. " What on earth do you mean ? "

" Only this "—her right hand came swiftly from behind her

back, shewed him the miniature. "And don't think I've been spying on you. Arthur found it. This morning. In the drawer of your dressing-table. Take it, please." Her hand thrust the thing at him. "It's your property. I've no," the sarcasm cut like a razor, "right to deprive you of your mistress's picture."

Automatically, his lean jowl flushing, Cranston outstretched a palm; automatically, as she dropped it from her, he caught the trinket, stuffed it into his trouser-pocket. "So that's the trouble," he said to himself; and aloud, slowly: "And why, pray, should you imagine that Angela Hemmingway is my mistress?"

"I don't imagine it." The blood ebbed from Hermione's cheeks. "I know."

"How do you know?" Every instinct in Cranston urged him to attack. "What proof have you?"

"You took her to Paris!"

"I did not."

"She took you, I suppose."

All this time, Hermione had hardly moved from the wall. Now, suddenly, she took a step forward; and even Cranston recoiled before the sheer hatred in her.

"When I consented to marry you," she continued, "or rather, when I demeaned myself by marrying you, I was under the impression that you were an honourable man, a man I could respect. That was why I told you—and I have never told another soul—the exact truth about my first husband. Do you remember what you said about him? If not, let me remind you. You called him despicable. Despicable—my God!" The voice never rose a semi-tone. "If Tony was despicable, what are you—you who betray me with a woman of my own blood?"

"Hermione," he interrupted, "that's not true."

But the cold voice went on. "It *is* true—though you deny and deny it. I can't blame you for that. It's a man's duty, I suppose, to defend his mistress's honour. His wife's honour," she laughed, mirthlessly, "is in a different category. You never thought of mine, did you? when you brought my cousin to this house, when you let every lackey in your service make a mock of me."

"You're crazy." Cranston's temper began to rise. "What have the servants to do with it?"

"Nothing." Her lips curled in disgust. "Nothing at all. It doesn't matter, I presume, that your valet knows where you keep your mistress's picture; if your footmen know, and snigger

over, your adulteries. And you—you dared to despise Tony. Tony," still the voice never rose a semi-tone, "may have been bad. He was. Rotten bad! But at least he had the decency not to confide his lecheries to his batman."

Rage throttled her. Again she took a step towards him. But this time, Cranston did not recoil: for the mad accusation had maddened him.

"Do I understand," he said brutally, "that you gossiped with my servants before bringing this absurd charge? Because if so——"

"You utter cad!" For a moment, he thought she would have struck him across the face. Then, quietly as though the insult had passed her by, she moved to the bureau; took from it the case which he had sent up to her in the morning; and, thrusting that, too, into his hands, went on again:

"It's slightly damaged, I'm afraid; but perhaps you can have it repaired. Angela, I have no doubt—or possibly some other woman—will sell herself to you, as I once sold myself, for the price of it."

§ 3

Taking that jewel-case, stuffing it away with the miniature, Cranston's impulse was to turn on his heel, to go from the room. Suddenly and overwhelmingly, despite her beauty, he hated this woman, hated himself for having married her. "Let her do her worst," he thought sullenly. "I'm through with her, through with all females." Yet even so, he knew that, for Angela's sake, he could not leave matters where they stood. Hermione might have no proof of his infidelity; but it would be easy enough for her to get proof. Once told of that week in Paris, the stupidest detective could unravel the coil within four-and-twenty hours.

Meanwhile, Hermione could find no more words. Momentarily, the remembrance of his last brutality had stricken her dumb and blind with fury. She knew that if she essayed speech, she would only gibber at him.

So they stood, silent and savage, each fighting the devil that was in them: till at last, Cranston spoke.

"Since you refuse to believe a word I tell you about my relations with Angela Hemmingway," he said—and the speech rasped in his throat, "let us pass to the topic of my relations with another woman, with no less a woman than yourself. When you, as you so politely put it, demeaned yourself by marrying me,

you told me—let me remind you—that your particular object in doing so was to ensure the education, and the future, of your son. Is that correct ? And am I also correct in assuming that, when you demeaned yourself by marrying me, you were not unaware that I, too, had a particular object ? "

Cranston, his jowl working, the skin puckered round his eye-sockets, paused for a second ; and in that second, Hermione found her tongue.

" I know why you bought me," she flared out, " if that's what you mean. You wanted—don't think I've forgotten—' a wife with position,' ' a disciplined home,' and," her voice rose, " ' a mother for your children.' I thank God He spared me that last infamy."

Once more, silence fell between them ; once more—brutally—nothing warning him " Who cannot quarrel, may not care "—Cranston broke the silence.

" Since you admit I bought you," he shot at her, " at least have the decency to admit that I've been cheated. Yes "—his voice, too, rose—" cheated. You suspect me—on the flimsiest evidence—of infidelity. Supposing—a thing I won't admit—that I had been unfaithful to you. Whose would the fault be ? Not mine. I've fulfilled, more than fulfilled, my share of our bargain. But you ! What have you brought to it ? Position ? A fig for your position—it's no better than mine. A title ? A fig for your title—if I want titles, I can buy them. The Rawley influence ? To hell with the Rawley influence. I didn't marry you because you were a Rawley. I married you because I needed a son, a son of my own. And you've given me no son. You've given me nothing. Nothing, I tell you. Not even," his hands shook, " gratitude."

The word went home. He saw her flinch from it ; saw the crimson colour leap in fitful flashes to her cheeks ; saw the breasts heave under the silk of her frock as she strove vainly for reply. Her impotence to answer whetted all that was worst in him. He remembered her doubts of his honesty, her scorn of his birth, her cold acquiescences, his fears of her ; hotly, no longer afraid, he told himself to discipline her, to teach her, once and for all time, who was the master.

" Gratitude," he repeated. " One expects that much even from a bought woman."

Then, crudely, cruelly, while her breasts still heaved and the fitful colour still came and went by crimson flashes in her cheeks, he loosed the whips of his hate on her ; loosed them and tongue-lashed her till she shrank from his rage.

"You have taken," raged Cranston, "but what have you given? Affection? Trust? Obedience? Ask yourself those questions. Ask yourself—as I have been asking myself all these weeks—what profit this marriage of ours has been to me? You spoke of Cosgrave just now—compared me with him. Did you ever give yourself to me as you gave yourself to Cosgrave? Was *he* repugnant to you? You spoke of my mistress. Supposing that I had a mistress, do you imagine that I would tolerate from her a tithe of the things I have tolerated from you, from the woman who calls herself my wife? Wife! You call yourself my wife! You demand fidelity! And what do you offer in exchange for my fidelity? Ask yourself that question! Ask yourself why it is five months, five mortal months, since last I came to your room. Ask yourself"—the voice sank to a furious whisper—"why I have decided, decided definitely and absolutely that I will never come to your room again."

Rigid, Hermione heard her husband out; rigid, her back against the wall, she stared into his angry eyes. Her brain was a haze—a vari-coloured haze of prides and terrors, of hates and of desires. Nothing he had said persuaded her. Every word but added to her certainty of his unfaithfulness. She knew that he had betrayed her with Angela; knew that she loathed the thought of Angela—as she had never loathed the thought of that other woman, the unknown woman with whom Tony had betrayed her; knew, too, that she loathed herself for having been Gerald's—more than she had ever loathed herself for having been Tony's. Yet Gerald—Gerald she could not quite loathe; because, even through the gray haze of her terror, even through the purple haze of her pride, the power in him, the dominance of him thrilled some secret fibre of her womanhood.

"Do you understand?" he finished. "Do you understand what I have decided?"

"Perfectly." At last, pride ousting her terrors, the woman spoke. "But your decision—let me tell you—is superfluous."

"Why?"

"Because, as it happens, I too have come to a decision; and my decision"—the haze cleared from Hermione's brain as her eyes held resolute against his—"is to leave you, to separate myself from you."

"You have no cause for a separation." Suddenly, the heat of his rage went out of Gerald Cranston. Suddenly, he regained his self-control.

"A divorce, then."

"Divorce!"

"Oh"—bitterly, sarcastically, her loathing for Angela found vent—"you needn't be afraid. I shall not seek evidence against your mistress. You can arrange our divorce as you will. Doubtless, your money will buy it as easily as you bought our marriage. All I ask of you is that you buy it swiftly."

"And if I won't?"

"It will make no difference." Her jaw set stubbornly. "Separation or no separation, divorce or no divorce, I leave your house to-night."

She made a movement to pass him; and for an instant all Cranston's impulses drove him to let her go. He was sick of her, sick of the need for lying to her, sick of the whole business of women. . . Then, abruptly, as the material consequences of that going flashed through his mind, as he visualized the possible loss of his baronetcy, the certain smash of his disciplined home, he barred her path.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," he said, speaking as though he spoke to a servant.

"And who pray"—they were so close now that their faces almost touched—"will prevent me?"

"*I* will."

"How?"

"By force, if necessary."

"You wouldn't dare——"

"Dare!" Cranston laughed—but there was no mirth in the laughter. "You talk like a fool. To begin with, this isn't my house—it's yours. Yours and Arthur's. You'd forgotten that, I suppose."

She had forgotten; but her pride, her courage still held.

"And what difference does that make?" she flung at him.

"None whatever," once more, Cranston laughed, "except that it's kept up with my money, as Cosgrave is kept up with my money. . . However, we'll pass that—since you're not going to leave it."

"I *am* going to leave it."

"Eventually, perhaps. But not to-night—not till it suits my convenience."

"Your convenience?" The command in that stern voice hypnotized, bewildered Hermione. She felt her pride, her courage ebbing away.

"Precisely. *My* convenience. Listen!" Cranston raised a hand; and involuntarily she gave way before him, edging backwards towards the bureau. "I'll have no more talk of divorce, of separation, of your going away. At the moment,

your going away doesn't suit me. Why, is immaterial. Nor will I have any more talk of my so-called infidelity. That chapter's closed. Closed ! "

" It's not closed "—Hermione, knowing herself almost beaten, summoned up the last of her resolution—" and it never will be closed. I refuse—— "

" Refuse ! " Cranston's voice was terrible, their frosty fire as silver lightning in the blue of his eyes. " And what have *you* to refuse—you who take all and give nothing. But something you *shall* give : and that something is obedience. Yes—obedience. Do you understand me ? "

Once more they faced one another in absolute silence ; and, once more, in that absolute silence, Cranston, hating her, yet realized himself conscious, passionately conscious of this woman's beauty. Her beauty thrilled, crazed him. Fleetingly, his passion for it was the Sadist's passion, cruel, lusting for the infliction of pain.

" Understand ! " he repeated. " Understand, once and for all, that I forbid you to leave me ; that you will stay on, either here or at Studley, for so long as I please—and on my terms."

And on that, horribly, overwhelmingly, Hermione realized herself beaten—beaten to her knees. Prides, hates, desires—all these had been whipped out of her. She knew only terror ; a mad, unreasoning terror that swayed her where she stood. What if this man who, betraying her, could yet enforce obedience, should enforce other obediences, obediences of shame.

But already Cranston had turned from her ; already, she saw him by the door.

For in him, too, was terror—the stark terror of his own desires.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

§ 1

TEN days after his last bitter quarrel with Hermione, Gerald Cranston walked the best of his hunters slowly out of Langham Village and slowly down Three Step Hill towards Studley Farm.

All morning, all afternoon he had ridden with a strange unhorsemanly recklessness; and even now the recklessness had not gone out of him. He still wanted to gallop—to gallop like blazes. For only in reckless action, in the heat of a business-gamble or the speed of a horse, could he attain complete forgetfulness of this new terror which, coming upon him as he stood face to face with his wife in her rose-curtained boudoir, had driven him from her presence, driven him out of Aldford Street.

And this new terror, this conscious apprehension of his own physical passions towards the woman he had bought for wife, was still with him; still perched, like some evil bird, at his shoulder as he walked on, under the mist-wraithed sunset of the Shires, towards his home. "You want her," cackled the new terror. "You want her as you wanted Angela—physically."

The tired bay stumbled on the tarmac; almost fell as Cranston jagged cruelly at her mouth. "Sorry, old thing," he said, patting the arched neck, "sorry." Then, closing his legs on the saddle-flaps, he trotted out, a grim unfriendly figure in his mud-splashed scarlet, down the Melton Road.

Trotting, his will-power re-asserted itself; and automatically, he fell to considering the main business event of the past ten days—the arrival of Gordon Ibbotsleigh's specifications for the Marankari machinery. Thought of that machinery; of Wilfley's cautious representative with his, "I'm afraid I can't give you an exact estimate for some days"; and of his Bank-manager's reluctant, "If you don't mind, Mr. Cranston, I'd rather consult head-office before committing myself to any large increase of your private loan-account", crinkled his brows to an angry frown.

But the frown was not altogether for Wilfley's, not altogether for the Bank. Somehow, the main ecstasy had gone out of Marankari. Somehow, even the prospect of reaching his first million could no longer excite him.

Jogging on, off the Melton Turnpike for Little Dalby, his thoughts switched to another business event, to the letter from Robert Walsh which had informed him "in strictest confidence" that his baronetcy was now assured. But in that prospect, too, seemed little of ecstasy, less of excitement. "What's the use of a title now?" he thought savagely.

A mile or so beyond Little Dalby, with the twilight closing in, the bay mare began to fidget for her stable; and, nothing loath to be done with the unpleasurable day, he let her have her head; coming at a hand-canter through the open pasture-gates; and so up the drive to the lights of his hunting-box.

There, once again, he grew conscious of the new terror. Swinging himself from the saddle, handing over the tired horse to his stud-groom, passing from open air into the square firelit hall where Rennie waited to divest him of his hunting impedimenta, Hermione's face seemed visible before his eyes. The terror reminded him of their honeymoon-time, of her first surrender. "Hypocrite!" said his terror. "Hypocrite—with your talk of a loveless marriage and a disciplined home. You wanted the woman then: you want her still."

§ 2

Harold Cranston was no psychologist. And besides, he had come to talk business; was still talking business when, some hours later, he and Gerald faced one another over the port decanter in the small rigidly furnished dining-room of the reconstructed farm-house. "He's the same old Gerry," thought Harold, fascinated—as he had been fascinated since boyhood—by those steely penetrating eyes, by the whole dominant personality of this younger brother of his, whose accurate brain seemed to grasp an issue half-uttered, to counter an argument before one had fully broached it.

For outwardly, the terror of the last ten days had not altered Gerald Cranston. He still looked his old self—the athlete, the soldier. His mouth did not droop at the corners. There were no lines under his eyes; nothing to betray the mental conflict at work in him. If anything, he appeared more resolute, more efficient than ever.

"Never seen you looking so fit, old man," remarked Harold,

pouring himself a second glass of port. "Nothing like hunting, eh? I wish I still had the nerve for it."

"You'd better take it up again, then." Cranston eyed his brother's flabby good-natured countenance a trifle contemptuously. "It's no good giving way to one's nerves."

"That's all very well for you—you haven't got any," laughed Harold, and, taking advantage of the opportunity, came to the heart of his business.

"Talking of nerves," went on Harold, "I confess I've rather got the wind up about the coal situation. There's being a good deal of talk one way and the other—particularly at the pit—about control coming off earlier than we think. I met a chap from Coalville at the Club last night, and had a yarn with him about it. They've heard the same rumour there."

"Don't you worry your head about rumours, Harry." Cranston, scrutinizing his cigar-ash, spoke equably. "Control'll last till next August. The Bill's on the Statute Book. Even this Government can't let a whole industry down."

"Can't it?" And Harold who, on rare occasions, could be stubborn as Gerald, pressed home the point, till eventually the Chairman of Cranston's, Limited, said irritably:—

"For the Lord's sake, come down to brass tacks, and say what you're driving at. Control's got to come off some time or other—that's why I started the Red-and-Black fleet. And when it does, it'll be all the better for us."

"That's all very well from one point of view." Harold, gaining confidence, swigged off his second glass of port. "But supposing we get de-control to-morrow. What's going to happen then? *You* may be making profits in London, but the pit's making losses. If the Government leaves us in the cart, wages'll have to come down. We can't afford to go on paying the present schedule out of our own pockets. And if we don't go on paying it——"

Harold paused meaningly; poured himself a third glass of wine; and continued: "Take it from me, Gerry, if de-control comes before August, it'll mean a strike."

"And supposing it does mean a strike?" Cranston's irritation, his contempt for his brother's cowardice, rose. "That won't hurt us. The men'll stop out three weeks like they did last time."

"Don't you believe it." Harold thrust home conviction with pointed forefinger. "If the men down tools, it'll be a big strike—like 1911. Mark my words, the Federation's simply spoiling for a fight. Bob Smillie said, only the other day——"

"Damn Bob Smillie!" Cranston's teeth bit on the name of the miners' leader. "If he wants a fight, he can have it."

They argued the matter over their port for another ten minutes; and adjourning to the drawing room, prolonged it.

"You can call me a fool if you like, Gerry," expostulated Harold, straddling his legs in front of the fireplace, "but if by any chance the Government do go back on their word, there'll be merry hell at the pits. There's a pretty nasty spirit about. I took Meredith out to lunch yesterday. He's had some trouble with one of the checkweighers."

"Meredith"—Cranston flung away his cigar—"is always grousing about something or other. It's about time we sacked him and got another agent. Someone with more guts."

"But Meredith's been with us for ten years."

They wrangled about the agent for a sentence or so; then Harold reverted to his original topic.

"What'll happen," he asked, "if the Government leave us in the lurch, and the men *do* down tools?"

But by now Cranston had wearied of the argument. "They'll take up their tools again as soon as they're hungry," he said grimly. "If not before. Starvation's the best form of discipline I know. Meanwhile—just to shew you how little *I* believe in this precious strike of yours—I've bought another distributing business."

"When?" Harold's jaw dropped.

"Yesterday. Markham & Fry. I don't suppose you know them. But they're quite a force in the South. Offices and depots all along the coast—Folkestone, Brighton, Bournemouth, and those sort of places. Sandeman's going to scrap their horse-wagons and substitute Red-and-Black lorries. It all helps to advertise the London fleet."

"And how much is that going to cost?"

"Not much. I only gave 'em five thousand in cash. Another ten—less than that—will cover the re-equipment."

"But that'll bring the Bank loan to a hundred-and-fifty thousand pounds!"

"Well—it's my money, isn't it? I've guaranteed it." Cranston laughed—a short contemptuous laugh; and shortly afterwards, Harold took his departure.

"What's the matter with Gerry?" thought Harold, driving homeward under the misty stars. For the heartlessness, the inhumanity of that short laugh had hurt him; set all his nerves a-jangle with eerie premonitions.

§ 3

But in Gerald's mind, as he watched the tail-light of Harold's car disappear down the vale, were no premonitions. The business-talk, the opposition to his will, had stimulated his courage. "That brother of mine's a fool," he thought. "A bundle of nerves."

And from that, turning back into the house, his mind reverted to his own "nerves", to his terror of Hermione. "I've been a fool, too," he decided. "A sensuous, uxorious fool. What are women, children, sentiments or sensualities to me? I want money, power—the big things of life, not the fripperies."

All the same, remembrances of his honeymoon-week continued to haunt him; and strive as he might, he could not escape the knowledge that, during the last minutes of their quarrel at any rate, he *had* wanted Hermione at least as much, more perhaps, than he had ever wanted Angela.

Nor did morning—though he slept, according to custom, dreamlessly—quite dispel the haunting. He had ordered the Rolls for nine-thirty, ordered Simmons to expect him at Cosgrave. But all the way to Cosgrave—seated silent by his silent chauffeur, Rennie and his kit-bag in the saloon behind—his thoughts, harking back to that other journey by Empingham and Stamford, refused to consider the problem of the estate.

Once arrived, however—once in converse with Simmons—the problem re-gripped his mind. "You've done well," he said to the young ex-officer. For already money and brains had half transformed Arthur's inheritance: so that though the eagles above its gates were still broken-beaked and defaced by the weather, the gates themselves swung easily on their well-oiled hinges, and within, Cranston's tyres hardly bumped on the mended gravel. The home-farm, too, had been repaired. Cows lowed in its byres. Smoke spired from its chimney. While beyond, a new road led through the axe-opened larch-woods to the kempt elm-avenue which bisected the sheep-dotted pastures of the deer-free park; and, through the second gates, the great house shewed habitable enough—clean windows shining in the sun—on its massive-pedimented terraces.

"But the stables are a problem," said Simmons as, inspection finished, he and his employer passed out through the ball-room and stood gazing at the lake below. "It'll cost another four figures to put *them* right. And even if we let the place, nobody will use them."

They discussed the question of the stables at some length;

but came to no decision. For, all the while they were discussing it, Cranston's concentration was prey to remembrance of that other day, when he had stood in thin winter sunshine on this self-same terrace, looking down on this self-same lake, on these self-same woods. Then, Hermione had been with him. Then, only a year ago, her hand had rested in friendship on his arm. Whereas now—now she hated him!

§ 4

All the way back to Town, Cranston's thoughts remained with his wife. The terror, curiously enough, seemed in complete abeyance; but in its stead, was a questioning. For the first time in their married life, he began to consider Hermione's character, to realize how little he understood this woman he had married, how little intimacy there had ever been between them: till—lunching, frugally, by the roadside—it came to him that he could not even yet be certain whether—in that last bitter quarrel—his individuality had really beaten hers, really prevented her from leaving him.

His short meal over, the car moved off again; and presently, soothed by its unjolting speed, he dozed, waking to find the clock on the dashboard pointing the quarter past three, and the sunshine already petered out among gray clouds.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"We ought to be home by five, sir." answered the taciturn Lees.

"Well—let her out while the light holds."

"Very good, sir."

The speedometer-needle touched forty-five, held it; and Cranston returned to meditation. Supposing Hermione were to carry out her threat, were to leave him? "She wouldn't dare," he thought. Yet what if she did dare? What if she took Arthur with her? What if, consulting her solicitors, she sent detectives to Paris, to Versailles; found evidence for a judicial separation?

And at that, vaguely, the man's conscience began to prick him. "One woman tempted you," said the Puritan in him, "and you fell. But what of the other woman, what of her to whom you plighted public troth? Didn't you wrong her, Gerald Cranston, when you broke troth, when you went back on your bond?"

Gradually, however, as they neared London, and Lees, hampered by the traffic, throttled down from forty-five to twenty, Cranston's conscience ceased its pricking. Since he had done

with both women—with all women—it was useless to look back on the past. As for the bond—the bond, in all things save one, still held. Hermione was still his wife, he still her husband, still her master, still the master of their disciplined home.

Thinking of that disciplined home as the Rolls halted at its porched door-way, Hermione's husband felt all the old self-confidence renew itself in him. The mere size of the house, the two footmen at the door, the first glimpse of hall and staircase and lit crystal chandeliers behind them, flattered his every lust for material achievement. Let the little things, the woman-things, go hang! In the big things, in the money-and the commerce-things, he, Gerald Cranston, the ex-cornchandler, had registered —as this house proved—success. Mastering himself of the need for women, he had made himself a master of men—master, for instance, of this flunkey who, as he helped him off with his travelling-coat, volunteered the information: "Her ladyship is in the drawing room, sir."

"Is she alone?"

"No, sir. Her ladyship has company to tea."

Cranston, inquiring further, discovered the company to consist of Rorkton, Doxford and Alan; asked if tea had been up long; gave orders that fresh should be made for him; and went deliberately upstairs. His self-confidence still held; so that, opening the door to find Hermione seated between her father and Doxford on the long cushion-piled settee by the glowing fireplace, the sight of her face, immobile as wax in the light of the gold-shaded bracket-lamps, left him utterly cold.

"You needn't ring the bell," he said to her, shaking hands with his father-in-law. "I told them to bring up some more." Then, greeting Doxford and nodding casually to Alan, who was lounging on the sofa at the opposite side of the fireplace, he drew a chair to the tea-table and sat down.

"Any sport?" asked Alan.

"Not so bad. We had a pretty good gallop from Prior's Coppice yesterday afternoon."

"Really."

Conversation languished. It seemed to Cranston as though, at his entrance, a slight constraint had fallen on all four Rawleys. Watching them, he wondered for the tiniest fraction of a second whether by any chance Hermione had been consulting with her family about their domestic differences. That, of course, was absurd. Hermione, with no evidence to go on, would never dare . . .

A footman brought the fresh tea; and she poured it for him.

Thanking her, taking the cup, he noticed that her hand trembled. "What's up?" he thought. For, obviously, there was increasing tension in the atmosphere; obviously, not only Hermione but the three men were a trifle on edge. He saw the Earl glance quizzically at Doxford; caught a questioning glint in Alan's pale eyes. Possibly the Earl had found out about his loan to Alan. He tried to remember how much the boy still owed him; failed.

Then, a trifle abruptly, Doxford let the cat out of the bag.

"Father and I," said Doxford, smiling a little, "called to congratulate. A little prematurely, I grant you. Still, the list'll be out in a fortnight; and nowadays these things are pretty much *secret de polichinelle*."

"What things?" Inwardly, Cranston heaved a little sigh of relief.

"You hadn't heard, then?" Doxford smiled again. "I rather gathered you couldn't have—from Hermione's astonishment when we broke the good news to her."

"The good news being?" Cranston's tone betrayed the correct surprise.

"Neither more nor less, my dear Gerald"—the Earl took the answer out of his elder son's mouth—"than the unofficial information that you are about to be made a Baronet."

"Really, sir?" Again Cranston's tone suited itself to the occasion. Yet, as he glanced at Hermione, his heart dropped one distinct beat. It seemed to him that her violet eyes were full of hostile appraisal. "She can't *know* anything," he thought. "She can't have any idea that I bought the thing. And besides, why shouldn't I buy a title?" Nevertheless, and for the second time that day, his conscience pricked him. Then—Hermione's scrutiny continuing while Alan added a hearty, "Gratters, Gerald," to his father's cautious detailing of how the information had been acquired—he felt himself growing angry with her. "Damn it all," he mused, "she might at least pretend to be pleased."

But Hermione did not unbend; did not even pretend to smile when her father suggested "four red Fords rampant on a ground sable: supporters, two coal-miners striking proper" for the new baronet's coat-of-arms. Her attitude, in direct contradiction to that of the male Rawleys (even Doxford had relaxed from his usual stiffness) remained the attitude of the last ten days, impenetrably polite, impenetrably uninterested: so much so that Cranston, fearful for the disclosure of domestic secrets, felt more than glad when the Earl, who rarely missed an opportunity of discussing Marankari, suggested with a cautious,

" I wonder if you could spare me a minute or two in private: there's a little matter of business on which I'd like your advice," that he and his son-in-law should adjourn, " only for a quarter of an hour, my dear," to the downstairs sanctum.

§ 5

" I wish you wouldn't insist on my keeping your participation in the Syndicate so confoundedly quiet," said Rorkton, once they were alone in his son-in-law's work-room. " After all, now that Ibbotsleigh knows who's behind the thing——"

" Ibbotsleigh's at the back of beyond, sir." Cranston proffered a small cigar, which the Earl accepted, from the big silver box on his desk. " And we only let him into the secret because we couldn't very well help ourselves."

" Quite so." The Earl inhaled a slow smoke-puff. " Still—I don't like secrets. Never did. Especially from one's own family. It made me feel quite uncomfortable—that little tarradiddle I had to tell just now. However—you know best. I never did pretend to understand *la haute finance*. What I wanted to ask you about, of course, was the machinery. Did you see those people the other day?"

" Wilfleys?" With a wrench, Cranston dragged his mind away from the annoyance of Hermione. " Yes. I saw their man on Friday."

" And what did he say? How soon can they ship?" There was excitement in the Earl's voice.

" Within the month, if we have any luck." There was no excitement in Cranston's. He spoke slowly—an idea germinating in his mind. " But I'm afraid the plant's going to be more expensive than I first thought. What with the pumping outfit, the five-stamp battery, the six-foot Wilfley table, the rock-drills, the donkey-engine and the blacksmith's shop, we shall be lucky if we get out under forty thousand."

" Forty thousand pounds!" The Earl's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

" And on top of that, sir "—Cranston, the idea taking definite shape, spoke slower than ever—" we have the freight to Kano and the bullock-transport to the mine."

" Forty thousand seems a tremendous lot of money," interpolated Rorkton.

" It is. And money's rather tight these days. Still, I think we can manage. I had a talk to the Bank after seeing Wilfleys."

Purposefully, Cranston hesitated: till his father-in-law,

unable to restrain his anxiety, asked, "And will the Bank lend you what we need?"

"I'm afraid they won't lend it *to me.*" Resolutely, the younger man took his opening. "Because, to be perfectly frank, sir, I'm carrying about all I can cope with. But they'll probably lend it to the Syndicate—on terms."

"What terms, Gerald?" The Earl might be an amateur in finance, but he was expert enough in the handling of his fellows; and the excitement smoothed itself from his voice as he asked the plain question.

"I'm very much afraid," Cranston discarded finesse, "that the Bank will require, in addition to some form of assignment of our assets, the joint and several guarantee of the principal shareholders."

"You mean they'll want us both to make ourselves personally responsible for the repayment of the forty thousand?"

"Precisely."

Followed a long pause; then, quietly, the Earl said, "You know that I'm not a rich man; that if, by any chance, I had to pay up my share of this money, it would put me in a most terrible hole."

"I realize that, sir." Cranston's eyes were the concentrated eyes of a boxer in the ring. "But what else are we to do?"

"Couldn't we sell some of our shares?"

"That—even if it could be done—would mean parting with most of our profits."

"I see." Now, in his turn, the Earl hesitated. "But Gerald—supposing Marankari doesn't turn out according to our expectations?"

For answer, Cranston unlocked the drawer of his desk and took out the mining-engineer's latest cable, "A year's ore in sight."

"Splendid!" The Earl passed back the tissue. "Still—I'd like a little time to consider the matter."

"Do so by all means." Cranston, locking away the cable, permitted himself the semblance of a smile. "Though I can assure you that the whole thing's only a formality. With tin at its present price, the plant will pay for itself within the year."

"I'm sure I hope so, Gerald." The Earl rose; and Cranston, pleased at the result of the interview, followed him back to the drawing-room.

§ 6

Doxford had gone; but Alan was still standing in front of the fire with Hermione. "I hope you gave the governor some good advice," he chaffed.

"The best I could." Cranston, his mind still with Marankari, hardly noticed his wife. "What's happened to Cyril?"

"Cyril had to fly. He's meeting Tom Fotheringay at the Lustrum. And that reminds me"—Alan glanced at his sister—"Tom's very anxious to let his villa at Cap d'Ail. Cyril can't quite afford it—and I'm," a little diffidently, "even more broke to the wide than usual. So we've roped in little sister—at any rate for the first six weeks."

"And when, may I ask"—in a flash, Cranston was facing his wife—"was this arranged?"

"About ten minutes ago." Hermione's countenance wore a mask; and out of that mask her eyes—resolute as his own—stared at him in scarcely concealed hostility. "I hope you've no objection, Gerald."

For a second or so, Cranston made no reply. For a second or so, those commonplace words roused him to fury. He knew them for a challenge, for a direct challenge to his authority. Then, controlling himself, he asked: "And what about your hunting?"

"I'd rather go South than hunt," retorted Hermione; and added, with irritating politeness, "provided, as I say, that you've no objection."

Again, Cranston was conscious of fury. He realized himself in two minds—the one desiring, fervently, that she should go, get out of his house, leave him to his money-making—the other urging him, with equal fervour, to make her stay. "She's defying you," said that other mind. "Disobeying you. Flouting your authority. . ."

"Well," Alan spoke, "what about it, Gerry?"

He looked at Alan; looked at his father-in-law. What fools they were—both of them—not to perceive the matrimonial position! To them, this discussion was of the ordinariest. Whereas to him and Hermione . . . He faced her again, wondering—as he had wondered over his frugal lunch—how much character, how much individuality the mask of her face concealed from him.

"And Arthur?" he asked abruptly. "Is it your idea that he should go too?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind about Arthur."

Hermione's lips smiled; but the veiled hostility in her eyes did not abate. "He hasn't been over-well lately. Probably the change would do him good."

The suggestion only enraged Cranston the more. If he let her go, he must at least keep the boy as . . . as hostage for her behaviour. "I doubt it," he said, keeping his words somehow under discipline. "The Riviera is no place for kids."

"I must say I rather agree with Gerald on that point, my dear." Fortunately, the Earl came to his son-in-law's assistance. "And besides, what about Cyril? You know how fond *he* is of children!"

"Gerald"—Hermione evaded the side-issue—"hasn't said that I may go yet."

Once more Cranston, eyeing the pale immobile face of his wife, was conscious of challenge. Once more, hesitating (and remembering, as he hesitated, that other time when he had driven her from Aldford Street),he knew himself in two minds. "What's the matter with me?" ran his angry thoughts. "What the devil's the matter with me? Am I afraid of her? Am I afraid of these Rawleys?"

"I promised I'd telephone Cyril what we'd decided," put in Alan, glancing at the watch on his wrist. "Tom's got some cock-and-bull story about another offer. He's a perfect sharper when it comes to letting that villa of his."

And on that, suddenly, Cranston's intelligence voted for compromise. Let the woman go, the child stay. After all—with Rorkton still undecided about giving his guarantee—a family row was the one thing to be avoided.

"Of course I've no objection to your going," he said; and his face, too, was a mask; "providing you don't take Arthur with you."

For a moment, he sensed protest in her, a stiffening of antagonism. Almost, he could see the hands clench stubbornly behind her back. Then, politely, unemotionally, she thanked him for his compliance; and, turning to Alan, said: "You might tell Cyril to fix things up as soon as he can."

Watching Alan's back disappear through the drawing-room doorway; watching Hermione as she bent a dutiful cheek to her father's farewell kiss, it seemed to Gerald Cranston as though the whole scene had been unreal, fantastic, a play performed—and in his own house—by four strangers.

§ 7

And that sense of unreality, of staginess about his home persisted in Gerald Cranston's mind throughout the fortnight which preceded his wife's departure for the Riviera. His business-faculties still functioned as of yore; but his domestic faculties seemed in complete abeyance. It was as though something had stunned those domestic faculties; as though he had no more feelings for Hermione—for that strange woman-figure who, incomprehensibly, moved here and there about his spacious house; whom he met of an evening on his return from the City; to whom he said goodbye when he started off for his week-end hunting; with whom, for Arthur's sake and for the sake of their servants, he made pretence of Christmas festivity. "What's *she* doing in my life?" he used to ask himself.

Then, abruptly, on the very day that saw the announcement of his baronetcy, she was gone, vanished out of his life. "Mummy wented," said Arthur, lying sleepy in his cot. "She wented this afternoon. Will you hear me say my prayers, Steppy?"

Cranston heard the prayers out; kissed Arthur good-night, and went out to dine with his mother. The "old lady" was in high fettle. She called him "Sir Gerald"; made him a mock curtsey. "And when do you follow Hermione?" she asked.

The remark irritated him. Driving back to Aldford Street, he knew the triumph of his title—the telegrams, the letters, the photographs in the newspapers—for a barren and a bitter thing. Once home, his great house seemed like a tomb. Going upstairs to bed, he experienced a recrudescence of terror. "She's gone," said the terror. "Why did you let her go—you who still want her?"

Recklessly, next morning, he denied the terror. Recklessly; through the days that followed, he plunged into money-making. It was an anodyne, this money-making—a sure medicine against all fears. In business, one forgot one's fears; remembered only one's power—the sheer power of money.

It was so damned easy, though, this making of money! One needed only courage; and lo! everything one touched—the outside gambles and the inside, the tin and the coal, the oil and the nitrates, the spelter and the copra—must turn to gold. For, after all, what was gold? A mere symbol! Mere figures—figures one borrowed from the Bank or paid back to the Bank—figures in the sales-sheets at Copthall Avenue, in the cash-books at Pinner's Court—figures upon figures in the little locked ledger one pored over at Aldford Street. Yet the figures fascinated one;

thrilled one; stimulated one's brain as with heady wine; till that brain drove and drove like some tremendous dynamo, ever humming, humming and humming for a source of power.

Power! Money! Success! The gaining of these things—it seemed to Cranston in those weeks of Hermione's absence—could compensate for the loss of all others. And *his* power, *his* success was immense, superhuman. Nothing could escape; nothing stand against it. It bent Rorkton to his will. It built the Cosgrave stables. It sent his Red-and-Black fleet scouring the Southern Counties. It sent his machines speeding to Nigeria. Already, it had transfigured Gerald Cranston of Cornmarket Street, Leicester, into Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet, of Park Lane, London. Soon, it would transfigure Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet, into the peerage, into millionairedom.

Yet all the while, dimly through the haze of a megalomania so sudden, so overwhelming, so recklessly over-confident that it startled even the over-confident Sandeman to remonstrance, Gerald Cranston remained aware of those other losses, of a failure—an utterly incomprehensible failure—for which no success of power or money could quite compensate him.

The edifice of his business—or so it seemed to him in those hectic over-confident weeks—rose always, towering and towering till its steady girders spanned the financial skies. But that other edifice, the edifice of his marriage was unsteady, tottering to its foundations. It had no foundations—that other edifice. Meaning to build it upon rock, he had builded it on sand—on the shifting sand of emotions which mocked at discipline.

Sometimes, alone in the silence of the night, Cranston would try to analyze those emotions, to come to grips with them. But always the meaning, the very name of those emotions, eluded him. He knew only that they made him restless, dissatisfied; that there was guilt in them, and, behind guilt, a sharpness as of pain; and behind pain, a ghostly tormentor who cried out upon him: "What do ye lack, Gerald Cranston? What do ye lack?"

For the purpose of those queer gods whom men call Fate was still unaccomplished; nor might their victim—hardening his brain to the task of money, hardening his heart to the pricks of conscience, hardening his very soul against the knowledges of love—foresee even a glimpse of it. To him—still—Love stood for a thing accursed, for a thing all bodily, a force of ill omen luring weak men to their destruction. In him—still—was no true humility, but only a hard pride and the false certainty that his want of Hermione had been as his want of Angela, a shameful lusting after the perfumed flesh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

§ 1

And Hermione ?

All through those early days of her second separation from Gerald, her heart, too, had been hardening ; so that now—one morning late in January, as she sat idle, an unopened book on her lap, among luxurious cushions in the curved window-lounge of the villa at Cap d'Ail—her thoughts of him were one continuous bitterness, one set rigidity of outraged pride.

At last, pride telling her that she must not even think of Gerald, she opened her book and began to read. But the printed word could not hold her. Her eyes wandered from it—wandered here and there about the ample room which was Tom Fotheringay's pride.

One of the big bow-windows of that room had been lifted to let in the warm sea-breeze. Through it came the lisp of tiny waves creaming shorewards, from where the blue Mediterranean laughed like a boy in the sun, to break translucent on the channelled rocks directly below. While within, everything about her spoke of ease, of luxury, of that safe carefree life for which she had made her marriage-bargain. Gay chintzes upholstered the ample chairs. Persian rugs shone silken on the beeswaxed parquet. Books gleamed from their dustless cases ; pictures from their speckless walls. On the spindle-legged French tables, Fotheringay's silver and Fotheringay's china were gay with a thousand flowers. . . " For things like these," said the pride in Hermione Cranston, " you sold your body."

Restless, she threw down her book. Restlessly, she began to pace that seaward-facing room. Once more her mind cast back —back to that last bitter quarrel when Gerald had tongue-lashed her into submission.

" I hate him," she thought, remembering how, for a day and a night, that tongue-lashing had left her cowed, flaccid, too physically exhausted even to lock the door between his room and hers ; " yes—I hate him."

Then, remembering how, her individuality re-asserting itself, she had mustered the courage to turn that momentous key, she dismissed hatred; summoned up scorn in its place. "He isn't even worth hating," went on her thoughts.

But the scorn missed its target; recoiled, as it had recoiled before, on her own head. Of what use had it been to lock one's door against Gerald; to tell oneself, as she had been telling herself ever since, that the locking of that door marked the last stage in one's relationship with a man whose every thought, every action outraged the finest of one's sensibilities, when, all the while, one knew that the action had been unnecessary; that Gerald, come what might, would never again seek admittance to one's intimacy? "He doesn't want you," said the pride in Hermione Cranston. "He never did want you. He only wanted a wife with position."

At that, rage reddening either cheek, Cranston's wife ceased her pacing; and, returning to the window, stood for a long minute, hands clenched at her sides, staring blankly across the blue of the sea. "He doesn't want you," repeated the pride in her. "He never did want you. He only wanted—Angela."

Angela! How often, since that last bitter quarrel, she had raged against Angela; raged blindly, furiously, against the family loyalty which forbade her to discuss, even with the most confidential of solicitors, the guilt of a relative.

For of Angela's guilt, her mind had remained—despite all Gerald's protestations—utterly convinced. The thing, the horrible adulterous thing, needed no legal proof: since every instinct in her—every outraged instinct—proclaimed it certainty. "They cheated you," shouted those instincts. "They cheated you. Both of them."

Yet even so—even as, the blood ebbing from her cheeks, she controlled her sudden sullen rage-gust—it seemed to Hermione Cranston that it was not altogether the certainty of Angela's guilt which had driven her, for the second time, from Aldford Street. That certainty—surely—had only been one of many; one link—and not the last!—in a long chain of suspicions? "Since he never pretended to love me," she thought, not knowing the thought delusion, "might I not have forgiven him another woman?"

But those other certainties—and more especially the ultimate certainty which had come on her so suddenly, so overwhelmingly, at her father's words, "They're going to make Gerald a baronet"—she could not (or so it seemed to her) either forgive or forget.

Kneeling among the cushions, she considered that ultimate certainty again; considered it till every fibre in her body throbbed with the old agony—the agony which had repeated to her, all through that unforgettable Sunday afternoon, the sentence which Gerald had spoken in his fury, "If I want titles, I can buy them."

And, "Yes," thought Hermione in the delusion of her pride, "yes—it was the remembrance of those words which really drove me from Aldford Street. They, and they alone, proved all my suspicions of Gerald's dishonesty."

For—surely?—all her suspicions, all those doubts which, begun by the law-report read in Syrett's picture-paper, had reached climax with the instinctive knowledge that Gerald's title had been bought for money, were now proven; and proven to the hilt. Now—surely?—at long last she could say to herself, "Dishonest, dishonourable in one thing, this second husband of mine is dishonest, dishonourable in all."

Then, kneeling there alone by the window, all the pageant of the laughing sea spread out below, another dreader thought assailed the woman who had sold herself for safety. What if there were no safety? What if Gerald—Gerald who made money out of swindlers, who betrayed his wife, and corrupted, with the money he won from swindlers, the very fount of honour—were to attempt some dishonesty beyond the Law? What if his career were to end, as that other swindler's career had ended, in the dock? What if his dishonour left her—her and the son for whose sake she had sold her body—tied, and tied for life, to a bankrupt felon?

A little cloud blew over the sun. The sea chilled; and the breeze with it. But Hermione Cranston knelt on, dazed and hopeless, by the open window: thinking, thinking, thinking of that unforgettable Sunday afternoon when, clutching at opportunity, she had determined to defy Gerald and escape—not alone but with Arthur—not for a few weeks but for all time—from the menace of his authority. And, "Why," asked the pride in her, "why were you so weak? Why didn't you insist on bringing Arthur? Why did you let him beat you—beat you for the second time into this miserable submission?"

§ 2

The click of the door-handle startled Cranston's wife in mid-thought; and turning—one hand at her heart—she saw Alan, dressed for the day, a Panama hat on his head and his light dust-coat over his arm.

"Isn't it about time," drawled Alan, "that you got a move on? Cyril's been back from his walk the best part of an hour, and the car's been at the door for heaven knows how long."

Doxford appeared, also remonstrant: "I say, aren't you ready yet? I ordered *déjeuner* for twelve-thirty."

"All right. I shan't be more than ten minutes, Cyril."

Hermione, controlling herself, went upstairs; donned an osprey-feathered hat; took her sables from Syrett; and—a few minutes before mid-day—climbed into the big open touring-car they had hired for their stay.

"*N'arrêtez-pas au Casino—allez directement chez Ciro,*" called Doxford, whose French was the French of the English Foreign Office, as their chauffeur let in his clutch and darted headlong out through the iron gates of the villa, on to the Corniche Road.

"Damn it, Cyril," expostulated Alan, "you might give a fellow ten minutes' flutter at the tables."

"Plenty of time for that *after* lunch, Alan."

Hermione, leaning back between her politely wrangling brothers, kept silence. The little cloud had cleared from the sun. All the way to Monte Carlo it shone warmly radiant on gray-green terraced olive-gardens and pink-washed villas, on the ragged landward mountains and the blue coastwise mirror of the sea. But in her mind, the chill clouds—clouds of doubt and suspicion, of misery and hopelessness—persisted. What if Gerald's dishonesty were to go beyond the Law? What if, seeking safety, she had endangered not only herself and Arthur but the honour of her entire family?

She looked at Alan; thought how like he was to their dead mother; thought—for one fleeting instant—how terribly he and Cyril would resent any slur, even the slightest, on the name of Rawley. . .

It was twenty minutes after noon by the big clock on the Casino when they reached Monte Carlo, and, slowing past the little formal gardens where the fountains flashed and the pigeons fluttered in the sunlight, climbed, Alan still grumbling, the little hill towards the glass-roofed Gallery. Twelve-thirty to the second saw them taking their seats round the window-table at Ciro's.

Already, the restaurant was half-filled; and, as they sipped their cocktails, Doxford—who loved a gossip—began pointing out various celebrities.

"That's Annette," whispered Doxford, indicating a gorgeous brunette in the far corner of the big square room. "She's

with Aristide Marchand, the French newspaper man. Did you ever see such pearls ? "

" You don't imagine they're real, do you ? "

" My dear boy, of course they're real."

" I'd like to lay you even money they're not."

Again, the two brothers began a polite wrangle ; again, as in the car, Hermione kept silence. Her mind was still clouded. Glancing covertly at the famous *cocotte*, thinking of the pearls—Gerald's pearls !—round her own neck, it seemed to her that she had made herself even as that other woman—and with less excuse. " They say she was a housemaid once," went on Doxford. . . " Precisely," thought Hermione. " But I—I'm a Rawley."

Their meal arrived ; and she did her best to eat of it. But the rich food of Cyril's ordering tasted bitter in her mouth.

Their meal continued. The restaurant filled and filled. All about her she heard gay voices, the laughter of carefree people. Listening to that laughter, her mind unclouded ; till gradually a little of the old whimsical humour which had seen her through so many troubles came back. " Eat and drink," she told herself, " and pray that to-morrow won't see Gerald in gaol."

Cyril pressed more Burgundy on her, and she did not refuse. The red wine brought some of its own colour to her cheeks. She began to talk ; went on talking—a mite wildly, a mite maliciously. The brothers talked back at her, Rawley-talk, till her eyes sparkled, and laughter, the false laughter of pain, crinkled her lips. After all, since one had sold oneself, one might as well enjoy the price.

And then, suddenly, the sparkle went out of her eyes, leaving them hard as Gerald's own ; the sentence she was speaking froze in her mouth ; and her fingers, trembling as with cold, clutched tightly round the stem of her lifted wine-glass. " You've got to be calm," flashed her thoughts, " calm."

Calm ? How could she be calm, with *that woman* just outside the window ; with *that woman* about to lunch at the very next table ?

All through their meal, subconsciously, she had been wondering about that next table ; wondering why it should be the only one to remain empty, why the *maître-d'hôtel* should be so fussy at it, arranging and re-arranging the special flowers, the special wine-glasses, scrutinizing and re-scrutinizing the special menu. Now, consciously, she knew, even as the sentence froze in her mouth, that the special flowers, the special wine-glasses, the special menu were for . . . Angela.

"What's the matter?" asked Alan. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"Don't be so absurd." With a frightful effort, Hermione unclenched her fingers from the wine-glass; laughed; and finished her sentence.

By now, Angela was past the window, at the door of the restaurant. Hermione heard her voice, a trifle shrill, call to some unseen companion, "All right, only don't be long, there's a dear. We're scandalously late"; heard Alan's astonished, "Angie, by jingo. This *is* luck", as she mastered herself for the inevitable encounter.

Angela, apparently unconscious of Alan's hand-wave, walked slowly into the restaurant; stopped to speak with the *maître-d'hôtel;* looked up; and, perceiving her relatives, came straight towards them. Contrary to her usual custom, she wore a frock of plainest white; and for a moment, regarding the gold-haired girlishness of her, Hermione experienced the unreasoning madness, the unreasoning fear of jealousy. "Compared with *her*," she thought, "I look a hundred." Then the madness, the jealousy passed—leaving only the impulse to fly this encounter, to escape at all costs from Ciro's.

But already it was too late. Already Angela, holding out an ungloved hand, had greeted her with an utterly self-possessed, "But my dear, what a surprise! What a delightful surprise!"

"How do you do, Angela." Touching, dropping that limp little hand; watching her cousin smile dazzlingly at her brothers; listening while her cousin ordered the waiter to set a chair at their table, ordered herself a cocktail, and explained, "John's forgotten his money—he's sure to be heaven knows how long at Smith's—so I may as well sit with you till he comes"—Hermione felt incapable of speech. The very waft of Angela's bitter-sweet perfume was an insult, an abomination, a stink in her nostrils.

"And who is John?" asked Doxford.

"John, my dear Cyril," Angela, her eyes narrowing, paused melodramatically, "is none other than Mr. John Warburton of Boston, Mass., U.S.A., to whom—I may as well break the fact to you at once—your dear cousin was united in the bonds of unholy matrimony by the American Consul in Genoa exactly twenty-four hours ago."

"Then allow me, my dear cousin," Doxford's tone betrayed no hint of his surprise, "to offer you the first of the family congratulations."

"With mine," added Alan, "a good second."

At that, Hermione, too, managed the requisite word. But the word seared her throat. Sensitive as never before, it seemed to her that there was mockery in Angela's blue eyes, that the whole incident had been staged by some cruel Providence for the express purpose of putting her to shame.

Then Angela, still outwardly self-possessed, inquired after Gerald; and abruptly Gerald's wife was on the rack, tortured by an agony compared to which all her agonies of suspicion had been pleasure. Tortured, it was as though a veil, a red veil of blood, fell across her eyes; as though, through that veil, the face of the woman who had abetted Gerald's betrayal of her shewed all distorted, a scarlet target for her clenching hands.

At last, the veil parted; and she saw Angela clearly; answered her without a tremor, "Gerald's well, I believe. We left him in London."

But though the veil had cleared from her eyes, the torment of her mind continued, racking her to self-confession—to the hideous knowledge that all Gerald's other dishonesties counted as nothing against this one dishonesty, the dishonesty of Angela.

"Does Gerald know?" she wondered, as Angela's third husband—a tall, self-confident, high-foreheaded, clean-shaven, middle-aged product of his race—appeared; was introduced; shook hands effusively; and withdrew, taking his wife with him, to the empty table. "Has she written him that she's married?"

Now, the waft of that bitter-sweet perfume out of her nostrils, a little of Hermione's torment abated. The hideous knowledge, however, remained; and with it, slowly, came another knowledge—the knowledge that she hated the actual Angela more than she had ever hated the thought of her; more than she had ever hated Gerald, ever thought to hate a living soul.

The hatred was in her very vitals—urging her to destroy. From where she sat, she could still see, over a bank of flowers, Angela's face. She wanted to mar that face, to claw at its blue eyes with her nails, to tear great red gashes in its pale and dimpled cheeks.

That face—those insolent blue eyes, those pale and dimpled cheeks, those redly smiling lips—had been Gerald's. Gerald's! He had kissed them, fondled them; made love to them. *Grande amoureuse!* Ibbotsleigh's words echoed in her mind, stimulating the imaginings of it. Hatred and imagination painted her pictures—pictures of Gerald and Angela, of her face close to his, of her arms round his neck, and her body pressed against him. So, together, they had cheated her. . .

"Come on! It's high time we were toddling." Alan's drawl, insinuating itself between her mind and the imaginative pictures, wrenched Hermione's attention back to the present. Their meal was finished; Doxford had paid his bill; behind her chair, the waiter stood ready to help her on with her furs. She let him help her on with her furs; let herself be led, smiling fatuously, past that insolent dimpled face and out of the restaurant into the open air of the glass-roofed Gallery.

§ 3

The sun shone warmer than ever as Hermione and her two brothers walked down the little hill towards the Casino.

"Jolly place—Monte," drawled Alan. She felt that she hated the place. "All right if you've got money," retorted Cyril. She felt that she hated money. Money—that, also, the unexpected meeting with Angela seemed to have taught her—could not compensate for real unhappiness, real misery.

And *her* unhappiness, *her* misery, were real enough. Walking those pleasant palm-shaded gardens towards the broad shining steps of the Casino, she knew that hatred could hurt, and hurt most damnably; that knowledge, too, could hurt—hurt till one yearned to cry, till, almost, one could feel the tears welling to one's eyes. But as yet, sheer pride forbade her to cry.

At the foot of the Casino steps, her brothers halted to begin another wrangle. Alan wanted his "flutter"; Cyril to watch the pigeon-shooting. Automatically—realizing that the Rooms would stifle her—she elected to accompany Cyril.

"But you can't bear the pigeon shooting," protested Alan.

"I can bear it better than seeing you lose money."

The younger brother passed up the steps; and the elder, pleased with his little victory, led his sister round the Casino on to the big seaward-facing terrace. "They won't be starting for a quarter of an hour," he said. "We may as well stroll till then."

They strolled—greeting a friend here, an acquaintance there—till gun-fire began. All the while, Hermione moved, talked like an automaton. Her mind resented these friends, these acquaintances; resented even Cyril. She wanted to be alone. But she was afraid of being alone. Alone, she might encounter Angela. She felt that she could not again cope with Angela, with the red blindness of that terrifying hatred. She wanted to think. But she was afraid of thought. Thought tricked one—as it had

tricked her only that morning with the pretence that she could have forgiven Gerald another woman.

"And now for the pigeons," said Cyril.

She followed him, still moving automatically, off the terrace, into a lift; out of the lift and through the shallow pavilion to one of the front seats. Seating herself, she saw a shooter raise his gun, one of the five traps on the green sward drop open. The pigeon in the trap did not rise. It strutted—dazed at the sudden freedom. An assistant rolled a wooden ball at it. It took wing. The gun cracked. It fell mangled. A dog retrieved it.

Another shooter stepped to the mark; another trap dropped open. This time the bird rose; flew. The gun cracked twice before it fell.

To seaward, below the outward-curving semi-circle of low netted railings, a fisherman's boat barely rocked on the blue water. She watched a third bird clear the railings, fall wounded into the sea; watched the boatman make for it, stoop for it, haul it aboard.

The so-called sport revolted her. She hated it, hated the men who took part in it, hated Cyril for having forced her to watch this unnecessary cruelty. Men were all cruel, horrible. Why not? Since life itself was cruel—a torture.

The so-called sport went on. People, women among them, crowded to watch it. Behind her, men betted on every shot. In front of her, the shots went home—maiming the lovely birds. Hardly a bird escaped. The monotony of their wounding, of their slaughter nauseated her; yet she could not tear her eyes away. The gun-crack, the spurting feathers, the running dog, the limp corpses, the blood, the acrid smell of cordite fascinated her. This was the place of pain. And she, too, was in pain.

At last Cyril, tired of watching, led her away. They took the lift again; and, re-mounting to the terrace, strolled another ten minutes. Sun-set was beginning. The thin air chilled. The blue had gone out of the sea. To landward, La Turbie and Mont Agel spired austere to the violet skies. Despite her furs, Hermione shivered. "We'd better go and find Alan," said Cyril.

Rounding the Casino once more, they ran into the boy. Alan's face was as white as his buckskin shoes. His whole body trembled. He could hardly answer Doxford's cynical, "Hallo! Been losing again?"

"Losing?" he stammered, pulling wad after wad of crumpled notes out of his trouser-pockets. "I don't think. Look at these,

And these. I haven't had time to count 'em yet. But there's the best part of a thousand quid on me if there's a penny. And ten minutes ago I was down to my last louis. Then two came up four times running—God bless it!"

"Even if you have won for once, you needn't inform the whole of Monte Carlo," said Doxford.

"Sorry." With an effort, the boy calmed himself; put away the notes. "But a win like that goes to one's head. What about a drink? Some tea?"

They went to the Paris for tea and cocktails. All the while they were drinking, Alan insisted on explaining his *coups*. "After that first maximum, I simply plastered the table—*carrés*, *chevaux*, *transversales*, the whole boiling of 'em."

"And what do you propose doing with all this money?" put in Doxford.

"Some of it's mortgaged." Alan winked mysteriously. "I'll probably play up the rest. Meanwhile, I've got to go and see Victor at Smith's. If you two wait here, I'll bring the car back with me."

"Silly young fool," commented Cyril, who hardly ever played, as his brother hurried off. "I wonder what he wants to see Victor Bethell about. Been borrowing from the Bank, I expect."

"I don't see that it matters—as long as he pays them back." Hermione's comment displayed little interest. Yesterday evening, Alan's win might have excited her. This evening, nothing could excite her. She felt paralyzed—paralyzed with new knowledges.

In twenty minutes Alan returned; and they followed him out of the hotel to the waiting Delaunay.

"Paid off your loan?" asked Doxford as they climbed aboard.

"What do you mean?"

"Your bank-loan, of course."

"I haven't got a bank-loan. I only wanted Victor to give me some English money." Alan, biting his lips, subsided into silence till they reached Cap d'Ail; and Cyril, on the excuse of letter-writing, went upstairs to his own room. Then, alone with his sister in the little Moorish hall, he asked nonchalantly, "I say—Gerald's in Town, isn't he?"

"Gerald?" Hermione started. "Yes. I suppose so. Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I just wondered."

Hermione, her face drawn with the strain of the day, was about

to follow Doxford when something in her brother's attitude struck her as peculiar. "You must have had some reason," she went on, speaking half at random.

"Well, as a matter of fact——" Alan, biting his lips again, blushed; but did not finish the sentence.

Though as yet she had no inkling of the truth, the blush, the lip-biting stirred Hermione's curiosity. "Go on," she prompted, unconsciously imitating Gerald. "As a matter of fact——"

"It's got nothing to do with you." Alan shuffled on his feet. His voice grew sulky—turning her curiosity to suspicion.

"Then why," knowing the boy's curious temper, she laid a hand on his arm, "if it's got nothing to do with me, do you ask me if Gerald's in Town?"

"Only because," the muscles under her hand grew rigid, "I wanted to know."

"Why?"

"Never mind why."

"But I do mind."

"Well—I can't tell you. I promised——" He shook off her detaining hand; turned to go.

But now, Hermione's suspicions were aroused. Alan had won a thousand. Some of that thousand was "mortgaged"—not to Smith's Bank. Alan had wanted English money; wanted to know if Gerald were in Town. "Tell me," she said, and the words shook in her teeth. "This promise. Was it made to Gerald?"

Alan nodded.

"What about? Money?"

The boy nodded again.

"You borrowed some from him?" She could hardly keep the anger out of her voice.

"Only a couple of hundred." Alan, unaware of his sister's rage, carried the thing off with an air. "I've paid back half of it already."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Oh, some time ago. In the summer. That's why"—Alan drew out his pocket-book; opened it; and displayed a hundred-pound note—"I was so jolly glad I won enough to send him this."

Then he slipped the note back into its place; and added, laughing, "He's a good sport, is brother-in-law Gerald. I don't mind telling you I was in the devil's own hole when I went to him."

"Alan," Hermione controlled herself, "you say you borrowed

that money in the summer. What time in the summer? After I went away for my holidays?"

"No. Just before."

"Then why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you go to father?"

"Father wasn't in Town. He was away for the week-end."

Again, Alan fell sulky. Again, Hermione laid a hand on his arm. The half-truth warned her that she must find out, find out at all costs the exact details of this transaction between her brother and her husband. "You may as well tell me everything," she said. "I shan't let it go any further."

"You promise not to let on to Gerald?"

She hesitated a second; then agreed.

"All right. Only I'd rather not tell you here."

He opened the door of the lounge-room; clicked on the lights. Seating herself opposite to him, watching his weak lips as they began, "To tell you the truth, if it hadn't been for brother-in-law Gerald, I'd have had to send in my papers," Hermione was conscious of a fearful foreboding. She remembered her thoughts of him in the car; remembered telling herself how terribly he and Cyril would resent any slur on the name of Rawley.

And the foreboding justified itself. Alan's story left it in no doubt. The name of Rawley had been saved by Gerald. Saved, too—her tactful cross-examination elicited—on the very day of their first quarrel, when she had taunted him with the difference in their birth. "God!" said the pride in her. "God! How he must have laughed at you . . ."

Alan, utterly unsuspicious, finished his story; and suggested a cocktail. She refused it; went upstairs to dress. Dressing, she would have sold her soul for tears.

But still—though this new torture, the torture of knowing Alan dishonourable, crazed her, blinded her, racked her to the last misery—Hermione could not cry. For as yet, there was no true humility in her. As yet—thinking of Angela's face, watching Alan's across the silver-set dining-table—she saw them both as enemies, allied for her confusion. "Gerald saved Alan," went on the pride in her. "Gerald loved Angela. You—he merely bought for a price."

§ 4

All that night, Hermione, tossing sleepless on crumpled pillows, could have screamed for pain. The thoughts of Alan, of Angela, were like knives in her either breast. Those two—

Rawleys both—had united to betray her ; to humble her pride. She hated them ; hated herself. "Why should I care? " she thought stubbornly. "Gerald's nothing to me."

That mood of stubbornness endured for a week. Yet all through it, dimly she was aware of revelation. Her pride still held : so that she could not see whither her jealousy of Angela, her disgust at Alan might be tending : so that she failed to realize how all her torments, all her fears, all her doubts and all her suspicions, were but parts and parcels of her feelings for Gerald. Nevertheless—in pride's despite—she could not avoid the knowledge that she no longer hated Gerald ; that she could no longer contemplate, as she had contemplated when she left England, the prospect of perpetual separation from him.

Then, slowly, as the equable days went by without any further *rencontre* between her and Angela, Hermione's mood changed. From pride, she passed to despair—seeing her life in ruins, Gerald even as Tony. "What's the use of going back to him ? " ran her thoughts. "He's rotten—rotten." Yet all that while she knew that she was lying to herself—because Gerald had saved Alan.

Alan, at the end of January, went back to his regiment, leaving her alone with Cyril. Angela—she saw by the local paper—had taken ship for the States. Released from their actual presences, her mind seemed to resume its normal functions. She began to miss Arthur, to think about going home, to wish that Gerald would add some word to the nurse's dutiful bulletins with the kiss-crosses scrawled at their foot. But no word came from Gerald ; and instinct, some mysterious instinct she could not analyze, warned her not to go home ; warned her to wait, here among the sunshine and the palm-trees, for revelation.

Those days, she grew very aloof ; and Doxford, suspecting more than she knew, respected her aloofness, making his own amusements, leaving her to wander where she would—a solitary, tweeded figure, a stick in her hand and her lunch in her pocket—up and down, down and up the steep hills that towered above the Riviera. It was among those hills that the first tears came to her eyes.

But pride still cheated revelation. Only very gradually, as the time of their separation lengthened, did self-knowledge begin to strip away those many garments of illusion with which Gerald Cranston's lady had cloaked both her own image and the image of her second husband. Only very gradually, considering their marriage-bargain, was it borne in on her that there can be no true marriage without love. Only very gradually, thinking

much of love, did she vaguely divine that the emotion her youth had conceived for Anthony Cosgrave could not have been love, but only the blind gropings of puberty after some passionate experience.

That divination shocked her beyond all bearing; and for a week, introspection abandoned, she flung herself into gaieties. Gaieties, however, could not make her gay. Soon, she had resumed her aloofness, her solitary walks among the hills: till gradually, terribly, irresistibly—as garment after garment fell away from the images her mind had made—introspection revealed the love of her subconscious seeking, that urge to passion which had driven her, for just one night in all their nights, to give herself without repugnance to her second husband. "And he didn't even notice," she thought. "To him, it was just—routine."

But that thought was the worst torment of all. Resolutely, she put it away. Resolutely, o' nights when the urge to passion scorched her mind like a flame, she summoned, to quench that flame, not Gerald, but a dream-man, a male symbol of accomplished love.

But the dream-man remained dream: for Hermione was no Angela, no *grande amoureuse* to pick some casual lover from the crowd. In her, nourished by high tradition, dwelt the older virtues, the inviolate and inviolable chastities of true romance: so that though, for her as for many a woman, the dream-man sufficed his hour, the mere recognition of his existence left her, strangely and for the first time, humbled. "Who am I," she used to think when that urge to passion scorched her like a flame, "who am I to judge Gerald?"

And from that—one evening towards the end of February as she watched the lights below Roquebrune out-twinkle sudden silver against an indigo sea—Hermione reached revelation; and, seeing the face of Truth, saw that she loved Gerald as she had never loved Tony; loved him enough to forgive (should he but ask it) even his betrayal of her.

Yet one truth, the last and the greatest, the truth that all love is humility, a giving and not a receiving, the queer gods still kept secret from that Hermione Cranston who—within twenty-four hours of reaching revelation—took train, half in hope and half in fear, for England.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

§ 1

THE queer gods, you see, had not yet finished with the Cranstons. For, even while Gerald's wife was waiting among the Riviera palm-trees on love's penultimate revelation, the blow predicted by Gerald's brother had fallen on the coal industry : so that the very first item of home news which flashed across Hermione's eyes as—landing hopeful after the mildest of Channel-crossings—she leaned back in her Pullman seat and opened the evening paper which Syrett had secured for her, was a flaring double-column headline, " Prominent Coal-owner Says No Compromise."

The ' prominent coal-owner ' turned out to be none other than Gerald ; and the mere sight of his name in print (she had been thinking of him, almost to the exclusion of Arthur, ever since leaving Cap d'Ail) stirred Hermione to a strange pleasure. Reading on, moreover, her pleasure grew. Apparently, the miners' leaders were threatening another coal-strike. Gerald advised the public " on no account to panic." He advised them to " fight " ; to " fight to a finish for these vital principles." The very forthrightness of the interview seemed to prove how unjust had been her suspicions of his commercial code.

And the leading article, to which she turned for further elucidation of the " vital principles " of which Gerald had spoken, more than confirmed the injustice of those old suspicions. " Sir Gerald Cranston," she read, " is one of the leading men in the coal industry, and a practical philanthropist. To his untiring energy, London owes its first systematic distribution of domestic fuel. That, perhaps, is why he realizes, better than any Socialistic dreamer, that no legislation can go behind the plain laws of economics, which are, briefly . . . "

But the ' plain laws of economics ' as set out by the leader-writer proved rather baffling ; and eventually Hermione gave up trying to understand them, abandoning herself, as the train sped Londonwards, to a half-sleeping half-waking dream in which she imagined herself Gerald's help-meet in his forthcoming fight.

Arrival at Victoria, however, where Lees, meeting her with the Rolls, volunteered the information that Sir Gerald had been " rather queer " for some days and that his mother was even then at Aldford Street, " nursing him, your ladyship," dissipated dreamery, changing the strange pleasure to a stranger depression.

It was not the fact of Gerald's illness which depressed her (that, curiously enough, only made him seem more human); rather was it the idea—and all the short way back to Aldford Street, sitting bolt upright in the great car, her hands clasped on her lap and her violet eyes dark with unspoken premonitions, the idea haunted Hermione's inmost consciousness—that she had expected too much from this second home-coming; expected, foolishly, that Gerald, too, might have come to revelation. . . For, of course, Gerald had come to no revelation. He, of course —the interview alone proved it—was still the same, still so wrapped up in his business that even illness had not prevented him from talking coal with the newspaper-men. " He can't be so very bad," she thought selfishly.

Nevertheless when, Aldford Street reached, Gerald Cranston's wife found herself closeted with Gerald Cranston's mother in the green-and-gold morning-room, a little of her selfishness abated. The obvious relief, the obvious fatigue in the blue eyes (so like Gerald's) of the little old lady who rose from her seat by the fire, saying, " I'm so glad you're back, my dear. One way and another, it's been rather a trying time," seemed like a reproach.

" But why didn't you telegraph me, Mrs. Cranston? " she asked, and her lips quivered a little. " I was only enjoying myself. I could have come home at any moment."

" I wanted to," answered Mrs. Cranston simply, " but Gerry wouldn't let me."

" I'm sorry you've had such a trying time." Hermione, controlling her voice, spoke stiffly: for the words had gone straight to her heart, wounding it to a sudden jealousy. " So he didn't want me," ran her thoughts; " he only wanted his mother." Then, the jealousy giving way to sheer anxiety, she went on, rapidly, her lips again quivering, " Has Gerald been very bad? What was it? Is he better? Can I go up to him? "

" You can't go up yet awhile, I'm afraid." Mrs. Cranston answered the last question first. " But there's nothing for you to worry yourself about. Gerry's only had a dose of the 'flu, and a touch—the slightest touch—of pleurisy. He's better now. Ever so much better. The doctor says he'll be out of bed in a couple of days."

"Then why can't I go up at once?"

"Only because he's got his secretary with him." And Mrs. Cranston added, laughing for the first time since her daughter-in-law had entered the room: "Discipline's discipline, my dear. You know what Gerry's like when he's working."

At that, once more, jealousy stabbed Hermione to the heart. "His work and his mother!" she thought angrily. "I play second fiddle to both."

"There's one good thing," said Mrs. Cranston cheerfully. "Arthur's all right. Gerry sent him down to Studley before he had time to catch the beastly thing."

Before Hermione could reply—the abrupt information, the abrupt self-knowledge that she had not even thought, since entering the house, to inquire after her son, dazed her more than a little—a footman announced, "Mr. Harold Cranston", and her brother-in-law entered the room. Greeting Harold, watching him as he turned from her to his mother, listening to his excited, "Is he better to-day? Can I see him soon?", her jealousy turned to anger. "I'm only a cypher," she thought, "a cypher in my own home. These Cranstons" (the little old lady's, "I expect Gerry will send down when he's ready for you, Harry," held all Gerald's irritating calm) "regard me no more than they regard a piece of furniture."

And that sense of cypherhood, that feeling that neither Gerald nor Gerald's family regarded her as one of themselves, grew stronger in Hermione as Mrs. Cranston, resuming her seat on the sofa, continued, "And how are things in the City, Harry? Any better?" only to be met with a gloomy, "They're going from bad to worse, mother. The men aren't out yet, of course. But they soon will be. In three weeks from to-day—take it from me—there won't be a pit working in the whole of England. And that'll only be the beginning of the trouble. If the Triple Alliance decide to back the Miners' Federation, it'll be the nearest thing to a revolution this country's ever seen."

All the same, Harold's talk interested his sister-in-law; and, doing her best to follow it, she remembered her dream in the train. If, as both the brothers seemed to think, they were indeed faced with that "fight to a finish" she had read of in the newspapers, surely there must be some way, some little insignificant way, in which she could help Gerald.

Tillotson, however, limping in, with a tactful, "I hope you had a good journey, Lady Hermione," to order Harold first into the presence, destroyed even that hope; and, after a little while, making her excuses to Mrs. Cranston, she went upstairs to bathe,

and change her travelling-clothes. "I've been a fool," she thought, "a silly, sentimental fool. He'll never ask me to forgive. Never. I'm nothing to him. Less than nothing."

§ 2

And—momentarily, at any rate—it must be admitted that Hermione's thoughts were accurate enough. So far Gerald Cranston—confined to his room for ten whole fuming days—had scarcely troubled to consider the problem of her homecoming. That problem, as many another, would have to wait. For the present, he needed every ounce of his concentration to weather the threatening crisis.

It had happened so unexpectedly, this crisis. There had been nothing—except Harold's disregarded warning—to prepare a man for it. Little more than a fortnight ago, the mere idea of a great coal-struggle had seemed fantastic, incredible. Yet the fantastic, the incredible, was come to pass. Within twenty days, unless some miracle occurred, the men would be downing tools.

Waiting there—'bed-ridden', as he phrased it to himself in a sudden gust of irritation—for his brother, Gerald Cranston's mind recalled, step by step, the coming-to-pass of the incredible: the first private intimation, received on the fifteenth of February, that the Government, despite all its promises, had determined to eat its own Bill and de-control the pits within six weeks; the official pronouncement of policy issued, exactly eight days later, to the Press; the miners' determination to resist that policy to the limit; and his own Association's decision—taken willy-nilly, ruin its only alternative, on the very afternoon his illness had struck the legs from under him—that wages must be reduced, district by district, to the economic level.

That decision, too, the Miners' Federation had sought to resist; were still—if one could trust Harold's reports—resisting. "The fools!" went on his thoughts; "the blind ignorant fools! Haven't they had enough of Governmental interference? . . ."

The telephone at Cranston's elbow, ringing loudly, disturbed thought; and just as he had finished dealing with the call, Tillotson returned, escorting Harold.

"How are you feeling, old man?" Harold began. "How's the temperature to-day? Normal, if I'm any judge——"

"Never mind my temperature, Harry." Cranston's tone revealed all the irritation of invalidism. "I'm far more interested in what happened at to-day's meeting. Tell me: Is there any chance of these idiots seeing reason?"

"Very little, I'm afraid." Harold, seating himself by his brother's bedside, twirled gloomily at his gray moustache. "This man Hodges seems the best of them. But even he's got a bee in his bonnet. You see, Gerry, these chaps aren't out for plain business. They're out for politics as well. That's the whole difficulty. To hear them talk generalities, you'd think butter wouldn't melt in their mouths. But when it comes down to a question of wages, damn it !, you can't get any sense out of 'em. They're just like mules. What they really want, of course, is nationalization."

"Well, they won't get that if they stop out for a year."

Cranston laughed, his old self-confident laugh ; but there was no laughter in Harold's reply. "If they stop out three months, let alone a year," he maintained, "we shall be ruined ; and the country with us."

"Don't panic, Harry." Once more, the younger brother laughed. "They won't stop out six weeks—let alone three months. To begin with, they haven't got the money."

"They'll get money somehow." Harold, still mirthless, rose and began pacing slowly up and down the bedroom. "The Co-operative Societies'll back 'em. And the other Unions."

"Don't you believe it."

They argued the matter out for ten minutes ; till, at last, diffidently, Harold suggested the possibility of a compromise. "I've been thinking," he said, "though of course I couldn't say anything about it at the meeting, that if the Government would just help both sides over the next few months—— "

But at that, Cranston's temper exploded. "Compromise," he sneered. "What's the use of trying to compromise with people who haven't got enough gumption to see which side their bread's buttered ? Take it from me, there's nothing to be done with Smith, Hodges and company except lock 'em out till they come to their senses."

"I can't see that, Gerry." Harold came back to the bed. "It seems to me we're all in the same boat. If the pits can't be run at a profit—— "

"The pits *can* be run at a profit, once we get back to pre-war output and reasonable wages."

"But what are reasonable wages ? You can't expect the men to live on bread-and-cheese."

"They don't deserve that—for five hours at the coal-face. Damn it, an ordinary clerk works ten hours a day."

"It isn't quite the same kind of work."

"It's brain-work, anyway."

They argued on for another quarter-of-an-hour. Then, still unconvinced, Harold made to go. " I've got to catch the seven ten," he said, " but I'll be up again the day after to-morrow. By the way, what about Hermione ? You know she's home, of course. Shall I tell her you're free ? "

" No. I want Tillotson first. You might send him up, will you ? "

" All right."

Harold, something of astonishment in his gray-green eyes, went out ; and the invalid, left alone, sank back among his pillows. The short interview, the short afternoon's work preceding it, had tired him beyond expectation. His mind felt weary. His head throbbed. Tillotson, entering notebook-in-hand, found him more irritable than ever.

Work, however—they went at it hammer-and-tongs for thirty strenuous minutes—banished both headache and irritability ; and by the time dictation was through for the day, Cranston seemed almost his old self. " Don't *you* get the wind-up about this strike-business," he told the reluctantly admiring secretary. " And don't let Sandeman. Tell him that if the worst comes to the worst, we'll get enough coal from America and the Continent to keep his Red-and-Black fleet going till we've broken the M.F.A."

" Very good, Sir Gerald." Tillotson, closing his fountain-pen, hesitated the respectful moment. " And is there anything else I can do ? "

" Nothing—except to let Lady Hermione know that we're through."

Speaking those words, Cranston's face betrayed never a quiver of emotion. Actually, he felt no emotion ; felt his heart still altogether hard, his mind still altogether resolute against this woman whose homecoming—as he had been telling himself ever since the arrival of her telegram—could be, at this particular juncture, merely an additional burden to his already overburdened brain.

§ 3

And even when, some five minutes later, she came in to him, Gerald Cranston's resolution against his wife held utterly firm. Looking on her as she walked slowly to his bedside, it astounded him to remember that terror with which her beauty had recently inspired him. " I must have been crazy," he thought, " crazy." But now—thank the Lord !—he was sane enough. Now, touch-

ing her hand, appraising the quiet elegance of the low-cut evening-gown for which she had changed her travelling-dress, he experienced no single tremor. If her presence affected him at all—or so it seemed to him in his fatigue—it was only as the presence of a stranger might have affected him, to a vague annoyance at the necessity of rousing himself from his pillows, of answering her inquiries about his health.

"Won't you sit down?" he said, indicating the seat Tillotson had just vacated. "I'm still rather a crock, as you see: though the doctors promise me I'll be about again by the end of the week. Otherwise, of course, I'd have got up to welcome you."

Seating herself as he bade her; asking him if he intended to take a week at the sea-side; listening to his equable, "That's quite impossible, I'm afraid", all its depressions, all its hopelessnesses returned fourfold to Hermione's mind. Looking on that set stern face, on that rigid mouth and those unsmiling eyes, it seemed as though her moment of revelation on the hillside above Roquebrune had never been, as though never—never while they lived—could any real reconciliation take place between them. "He hates me," she thought, "he hates me"; and so thinking, remembered how here, here in this very room, she had first become wise to his infidelity with Angela. "Does he know," she wondered, "does he know of her marriage?"

She had the impulse to tell him, casually, about her meeting with Angela; but somehow the words stuck in her throat. After all, what was the use of re-opening that old sore? Since Angela had gone to America, gone out of their lives for good. . .

Thinking thus, a little of her depression passed. She began to talk, quietly, unemotionally, about the commonplaces of her holiday, about Arthur: till gradually, regarding Gerald more carefully, it was borne in on her that he must have been far iller than Mrs. Cranston had admitted. And at that—her eyes wandering to the new telephone which had been run to his bedside, to the wire-baskets of papers on the shelf above his head and all those other business-impedimenta which spoke, more clearly than any words, of the strain he must have been putting on himself—she regained for the first time in many months her old respect for his character. Many faults he had, this second husband of hers; but at least—to use one of his own pet phrases—he "did his job."

Diffidently, she asked him a question about that job; and to her surprise, he replied at length, making plain, even to her limited commercial intelligence, the exact position in the coal industry.

" It sounds rather dangerous," she said when he had finished.

" Difficult, perhaps." He smiled, calming her fears. " But not dangerous. Strikes—*they'll* call it a lock-out, of course—are all in the day's work when one happens to be in the coal-business. Besides, it's our duty to beat these extremists."

Gerald, interested now, went on talking; but for a while, though her ears followed, Hermione's mind hung on the one word. " Duty ! " she thought. " Have I done mine ? Is it my own fault if this man hates me, if I'm less than nothing to him ? "

Then, sharply, another word impinged on her mind. " You see," Gerald was saying, " that it isn't really anybody's fault except the Government's. They haven't played straight with either side. Control's coming off at the end of this month; although we had their promise, their definite statutory promise, that it should last till August."

And, " I, too, made a promise," thought Hermione. " Less than a year ago I promised, at the altar, that I would love, honour and obey this second husband of mine. Have I kept that promise ? "

The mental question baffled her. Striving to answer it, she grew conscious of the acutest confusion. All the self-tortures of the past weeks re-racked her to misery. " Was it my lack of love," she asked herself, " my coldness that drove him to Angela ? "

But from that truth, all the false pride still left to Hermione revolted. Gerald—Gerald who talked so glibly of duty and of promises—had failed in *his* duty, broken the most sacred of his promises. Surely it was he, not she, who should repent, who should crave forgiveness ?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

§ 1

THROUGHOUT those ten fateful days which followed her return to Aldford Street, that confusion of thought, that last false certainty of pride, endured in Hermione. Though all else stood revealed, the ultimate truth—the truth that there is no real love without self-sacrifice—would not reveal itself to her. Wanting love's roses, she could not bring herself to face its thorns. Caught, like a rabbit in a trap, between the teeth of her pride and the teeth of her desire—for now, with every hour under Gerald's roof, her desires of him grew stronger—she suffered, and suffered damnably.

Even Arthur's return could not mitigate that suffering. She needed more than a child's affection; needed—dear God, how terribly!—the whole-souled, whole-hearted, whole-bodied devotion of this man who was not as other men; of this Gerald Cranston to whom—God help her!—she had allied herself, as a prostitute, in the hope of gain.

Yet even at the height of her suffering, pride stiffened her lips. Hurt, hurt almost to the final agony, she uttered no cry. Wandering, white-faced and miserable, up and down and about this house which Gerald's illness had turned to the semblance of an office—this house where, all day long, typewriters tapped and telephone-bells rang and messengers came dashing to the porch—this house where Gerald's henchmen and Gerald's journalists and Gerald's secretaries jostled one another in her tessellated hall—she told herself over and over and over again: "Let *him* repent, let him ask *me* for my forgiveness."

But all through those ten fateful days, and all through the ten fatefuller days which came after—days when the house grew quiet again, and Smithers, knocking nightly on her boudoir door, brought the same kindly-unkindly message, "Sir Gerald's telephoned to say he's busy, your ladyship; and will you dine without him"—the man who was not as other men gave never a sign of repentance, never even an inkling that he wished her to forgive.

§ 2

For Cranston, all through those last ten fateful days, remained more than ever Cranston. House-bound, he had known, very vaguely, depression ; the pricks of conscience ; the half-formed thought, " If she hates me, how can I blame her ? I wronged her. I broke my promise. I went back on my bond."

But up, out of the house, back in the whirligig of business, he dismissed his depression about Hermione—even as he dismissed those other depressions of illness-time ; the nagging suspicion that he should have foreseen the coal-crisis, prepared against it ; that he had departed from his doctrine of stability ; that, instead of frittering away his energies on outside gambles, he should have kept them all for the two main business-issues, Cranston's, Limited, and Marankari.

Those suspicions, that depression—he told himself—were childish, mere offsprings of his convalescence. If he had wronged Hermione, the wrong—since they had never pretended love for one another—was of the slightest. While as for business—in business as in matrimony, it was no use looking backwards, no use crying over spilt milk. There, too, if he had made mistakes, they had been mistakes of no importance. Important, cost what it might—and if the threatened stoppage left his fleet of two hundred lorries coal-less and unearning, it would cost him thousands upon thousands, while his pit but added to his losses —was only the winning of this battle against indiscipline.

For it was mainly as a fight against indiscipline, as a struggle between the rightly-won power of men like himself, men who voluntarily worked ten, twelve, twenty hours a day, and those other, lesser men who worked only under the compulsion of wages and the belly-pinch, that Gerald Cranston saw this struggle which threatened, more blackly with every passing hour, to engulf every industry in England. And with those men, as with their leaders, he had—or so it seemed to him—no particle of sympathy.

Yet—the illness once out of him—he had little anger against them. He was their enemy ; but an enemy inhuman—soulless and all the deadlier for his soullessness. They and their leaders were fools, dangerous children larking with lighted matches in the powder-magazines of commerce. Therefore, like children, they must be taught their lesson. Let the weaklings preach compromise, the sentimentalists prate of peace. There could be no compromise with folly, no peace with indiscipline. Once and for all—even though it meant ruin for him and starva-

tion for them—these colliers of his, and all those other colliers, must learn who were their masters.

So, heartless, gritting his teeth ; his wife, his wife's child, his mother, every outside person and every outside emotion forgotten ; Gerald Cranston flung himself into the fray : till, as the days passed, as every hour brought nearer the inevitable stoppage, inevitably, the sheer fanaticism of battle—that old, cold, controlled fanaticism of the sometime Gunner-Major—came back to him. He fought clean ; but he fought to kill. Having no mercy on himself, he had none on others. " Let them come out," he told the unhappy Sandeman. " Let them stop out till we've bled the M.F.A. white. Believe me, it's the only way."

And his public pronouncements—his interviews to the Press, his advertisements, the notices posted at his pit and in his depots —matched the words he spoke in private. The forthrightness, the recklessness of them, frightened even his fellow mine-owners. In vain, they remonstrated with him. In vain Harold, telephoning frantically from Leicester, told him that the notices had been torn down ; that only Meredith's influence had prevented a riot. " Let them riot," rasped back Cranston over the wire, " so long as they understand that we mean business."

For this was battle, battle to the limit. Weakness would mean only defeat, and defeat ruin. Either that, or something worse than ruin, submission to the under-dog, to the man who worked only for his belly-needs, in peace under the lash of starvation, in war under the fear of death.

Not that the under-dog would ever defeat him, Cranston. In brains, in guts, in stamina and self-discipline, in each and every quality that went to the winning of battles, he and he alone was the equal of ten million under-dogs. They and their like craved only after food, after holidays, after their wages and their whippets and their women. Obedient, they were welcome to their wages. Disobedient . . .

" Disobedient," thought Cranston furiously, " let them do their worst and learn their lesson."

§ 3

Yet that worst, when it actually occurred, surprised even Cranston. All day—Wednesday, March the thirtieth, said the calendar on his desk—he had been working with his usual rapid method in the sanctum at Pinner's Court, closing this gamble, closing that, cabling orders to Antwerp, orders to Le Havre, making certain and yet more certain that neither lack of funds

nor lack of coal should keep his Red-and-Black fleet from supplying its customers. "We're ready for them," he decided as evening drew on, "absolutely and utterly ready."

Nevertheless, he was not ready for that telegram from the Miners' Federation, a copy of which Tillotson, his face pale with over-work, laid suddenly before him. He had expected a strike—"let 'em call it a lock-out if they like"—one of those ordinary stoppages which had always been part and parcel of the coal business. This, however, if those words, "all notices must take effect, regardless of occupation", were intended seriously, meant more than a mere stoppage; meant neither more nor less than an attempt to wreck the pits.

"Shall I get on to the colliery?" asked Tillotson—and there was panic in his eyes.

"No." Cranston frowned. "Get me the Association. Then Leicester. If Mr. Harold's left the office, call me his private house."

Tillotson limped out, leaving him alone. Alone, he thought, "It's probably a bluff." And the Association thought so, too. "We're expecting them to cry off at the last minute, Sir Gerald," said the voice on the wire. "They'll never dare to bring out the safety-men."

Cranston hung up; and went on thinking. Then the bell rang again, and he heard Harold's, "Hallo, Gerry. Is that you?"

He read the notice over to Harold; began giving him instructions: "We can't afford to take chances. You'd better get your car out and go to the pit. Yes—to-night. That'll give you twenty-four hours to organise things. They'll probably bring up the ponies. If they don't, you can manage that with the officials. But whatever else happens, keep the pumps going."

"Right you are, Gerry. I'll do my best."

Harold rang off; and his brother, having cleared his desk, drove to his Club. At the Club, all was excitement—anxious men grouped round the news-ticker, anxious men grouped in the smoking room. Several members came up to him—questions on their lips. He brushed their questions aside; dined swiftly; drove on to a meeting of the Association; sat it out almost in silence; drove back to Aldford Street. Hermione had gone to bed. Mixing himself a whisky-and-soda, he felt glad of her absence.

At mid-night, Harold telephoned. The telegram from the M.F.A. had come through just as the last shift was going off. The "chaps" were "rather sullen", but Meredith didn't think

there would be any trouble. Even if the safety-men did come out, he and the officials could carry on.

"Good," said Cranston; and went to bed.

But for a long while, he could not sleep. Harold—all said and done—was a fool; Meredith little better. If the officials failed him, if they allowed themselves to be intimidated, if the pumps could not be kept going, the pit would flood. And, the pit once flooded, it might take a year to repair the damage. Imaginatively, he heard the water rising in the sumph, saw it swirl knee-deep along the haulage-ways. "Panic," he told himself, forcing his brain to sleep.

§ 4

And next morning, all next day, Cranston's panic seemed ridiculous. Reading the Emergency Proclamation Act in his newspaper, he smiled grim amusement. "For once in a way," he told Tillotson, "the Government are taking no chances. This Defence Force is a sound scheme."

Yet all that day he had the premonition of trouble; the feeling that Harold's telephone-messages, Meredith's, the Association's were too confident.

"Are you sure," he asked over the wire, "absolutely sure that you can get the ponies up and keep the pumps going?"

"The ponies are coming up now," answered Harold. "The shots-men have volunteered for the boilers, and the deputies are going to man the pumps."

That was at six o'clock on the evening of March the thirty-first. At seven, Cranston left the office; and drove home. The streets seemed as usual—no commotion, no crowds. Along the Embankment, the last of the sun lingered brightly. Only the extra policemen and the press-placards with that one ominous word, "Midnight!", betokened emergency. He came through the fringe of theatreland to Piccadilly. The sky-signs annoyed him. "Wasting coal," he thought.

Back at Aldford Street, he told an astonished footman to turn off half the lights. Dressing for one of his rare meals with Hermione, he vouchsafed her never a thought. His mind was at the bottom of the pit-shaft, listening for the clack and suck of his pumps. "Panic," he told himself again. "The pit's safe enough"; and on that, smoothing all anxiety from his face, went down to dinner.

Hermione, according to custom, was waiting in the morning-room. He noticed that she looked pale; asked her if she were

well. She answered that she had a " bit of a headache " ; and went on :——

" I see that the men are coming out to-night. Is it as serious as the newspapers say ? "

He retorted lightly, " Nothing's ever quite as serious as that " ; and closed his teeth on the topic.

They went in to dinner. She saw that he had ordered champagne ; refused it for herself ; wondered—thinking of all that she had read in the Press—at his unnatural calm. His calmness irritated her beyond speech. " He doesn't even hate me," she thought. " He only despises me." She wished that she could despise him ; knew that she could not, that she could only despise herself. " Why did I ever come home ? " continued her thoughts. " Why didn't I insist on a separation ? " Yet all the while her heart ached, ached with the knowledge of her need that he should love her.

Quietly, their meal progressed. Quietly, watching him, she wrestled with her agony. " Why care ? " said the pride in her. " He betrayed you. He cast you off like an old glove." She answered pride, " But I do care. I need him. I'd forgive everything—if only he'd ask me to." " But he never will," retorted pride.

Smithers brought coffee ; left them alone. Between them, silence rose like a wall. . .

Then, suddenly, sharply, the main telephone-bell began ringing—a long loud call that penetrated insistent to where they sat ; and watching Gerald, Hermione saw his face twitch, saw him half rise from his chair. The bell stopped. Outside in the hall, she could just hear Smithers' muffled voice. Gerald had re-seated himself ; was waiting—tensely, it seemed to her—for Smithers to come in. Smithers came in, hurriedly, saying : " It's a trunk-call, Sir Gerald. I couldn't quite make out the name—it sounded like Merrywith. The gentleman said he must speak to you personally, that the matter was urgent."

" Meredith ! " muttered Gerald ; and sprang for the door. Smithers followed him out. The door closed, leaving her alone. Intuitively, she began to be afraid. " That must be from the colliery," she thought. She tried to make out what Gerald was saying ; failed ; wondered why he should be speaking from the hall-instrument instead of from his sanctum. A minute passed. Two minutes. Awfully, her fear grew. She felt that she could not sit still ; rose trembling from her chair ; tip-toed to the door ; opened it.

Gerald was still at the telephone, listening. He did not

notice her appearance. His face had gone hard as granite. His eyes were blue fire. His fingers clenched the lifted instrument as though they would squeeze it shapeless. When he spoke, it was in no voice she had ever known.

" Very well," he said. " Tell my brother that I'll be at the pit within five hours. And, Meredith "—the strange voice rasped like a saw—" you're to stand no nonsense. Understand me ! No nonsense of any kind."

Gerald ceased speaking. His fingers, unclenching, hung up the receiver, put down the instrument. A second, he stood in thought ; then called, still in that strange rasping voice, " Smithers ! Smithers ! "

Smithers appeared ; was told, " I want Rennie. At once. Send him to me." Smithers went off. Gerald called after him, " Quicker than that, please " ; re-grasped the telephone. Still apparently unnoticed, she heard him ask for the garage number ; heard his gruff, " Is that you, Lees ? Have the Rolls at the door in ten minutes. Bring petrol for two hundred miles. Bring a bag, we may be away some days. And bring Havers with you. Same instructions for him. . ."

Lees seemed to remonstrate. Gerald snapped back, " Damn his cold. Carry out my orders, will you " ; slammed down the telephone, and turning to Rennie, who came at a run across the hall, went on :——

" Go straight upstairs. Get me out a travelling-suit. Pack for two nights. No evening-clothes. I'm going to the colliery. You're to come with me. Start in ten minutes. And, Rennie " —the Scotsman, who remembered this Cranston of old, was already on his heel for the staircase—" have we any cartridges for that automatic of mine ? "

" I've a box somewhere, Sir Gerald."

" Then bring them. And the pistol."

Those last words completed Hermione's terror. She wanted to question Gerald, to ask him why he needed the pistol. But before she could open her mouth, he was out of the hall, leaping three steps at a time after Rennie. Not that she had any need to question Gerald ! In the light of what she had read in the newspapers, the happening—even without those last words of his—shewed plain enough. There must be trouble, some riot, at the mine. Gerald, her Gerald, was going into danger.

The thought paralyzed her, rooting her feet to the paving of the hall. She could neither think nor speak. Her very brain seemed functionless. Servants came ; and she could only stare at them. The front door opened ; a footman peered for the car. The

chill air helped her back to thought. Gerald mustn't go—like this—without a word said between them. She must run upstairs, speak with him—tell him . . . "Tell him what?" asked her pride.

But already it was too late. Already, the lights of the Rolls gleamed beyond the door. Already—Rennie at his heels—Gerald was running down the staircase.

At the foot of the stairs, he stopped; let Rennie pass him. "Get that stuff on to the car," he said. "You'll travel behind, with me." Then, noticing her for the first time since he had left the dining-room, "I'm sorry to dash off like this. Unfortunately, things up at the pit are a bit worse than I anticipated."

He spoke calmly enough now; yet his calm could not deceive her. Looking up at him, she saw that his eyes were still fiery; his face hard, and grimmer than death itself.

"Gerry!" she faltered, and it was the first time that abbreviated name had ever passed her lips. "Gerry! You'll take care of yourself?"

For the fraction of a second, the grim face shewed her its astonishment. Then it went hard once more; and with a quiet, "There's nothing to worry about. I'll be back within forty-eight hours," he was past her, through the door, and stepping to the car.

Automatically, irresistibly compelled to follow, she heard the strange voice rasping to Lees and Havers, "Take the Great North Road to start with—drive in turns—one hour each—and drive like hell"; watched him climb aboard; heard the saloon door click home; watched the red tail-lamp disappear; and felt her heart choke in her throat as the Rolls fled hooting down Park Lane.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

§ 1

CRANSTON'S astonishment at Hermione's strange behaviour—never before had she called him 'Gerry'; never before, even during his illness, had he heard that particular note of anxiety in her voice—endured hardly longer than his face had indicated. Aldford Street once left behind him, concentration banished all but the subconscious memory of it.

For this, this of all moments, was not the one in which to think of women. How could a man afford to think of any woman when—if Meredith's transmission of Harold's message could be taken at its face-value—his pit, the very corner-stone of his fortune, was in jeopardy; when the mob—curse them!—were already gathering round his power-houses; when the boiler-men had threatened to draw the fires, and the final shift, wrecking the lamp-room, had sworn that, even though the remaining ponies starved or were drowned at the coal-face, not a headgear wheel should turn nor a pump suck while the stoppage lasted? And, "We'll see about that," thought Cranston savagely. "Yes, by God! we'll see about it."

Fidgeting his long body comfortable in the deep saloon as the lights of London streamed swiftly by, he knew himself one hot rage. This—this wanton sabotage went beyond indiscipline. It was mutiny—mob-law—rebellion—a thing to be quelled swiftly, ruthlessly, with rifles, with the machine-gun.

On that thought, slowly, terribly, Cranston's rage chilled, once again, to the old, cold fury of battle-time: so that, to Rennie, watching his set face covertly while the great car went purring out of London, he seemed more than ever reverted to that battery-commander about whom more than one hard-bitten horseman, sucking disgruntled at his unlit pipe as the six-gun column jolted slow through darkness, had been wont to remark, "He's a devil about his march-discipline, mate. But give the devil his due! I've never yet seen the kind of hell that'd put the wind up our Major Gerry."

Nor was the Scotsman's judgment at fault. Now, as then, this master of his feared no personal danger. His thoughts, as they considered the job ahead, were precise, unemotional, more merciless than a machine. Four hours—five at the most—would see him at the pit. Then these rebels, these mutineers, these wreckers of lamp-rooms and starvers of horses should learn, at any cost, who was their master. Meanwhile, "Switch on the light and tell Lees to give me his motor-map," said Gerald Cranston.

Rennie obeyed; and his master, spreading the map on his knee, began to study it. Already, they were almost beyond the shops and the trams. Soon, trams gave way to motor-buses; shops to villas. Presently, the villas grew sparser, revealing, between wall and rough-cast wall, little patches of garden, little glimpses of fields. Then, as the last suburban lamp-post swirled behind them, and Lees, undazzling his headlights, opened up to a roaring fifty, Rennie's master, his studies finished, lifted the speaking-tube and called through it in the old remembered battle-voice, "Bear half-left at High Barnet, and take the Birmingham Road."

High Barnet whizzed by; South Mimms; Ridge Hill; London Colney; St. Albans. The moon was up; the sky star-lit. All about their hurrying windows, the countryside gleamed and glittered like a dream of peace. The long road shone almost empty in the glare of their headlamps. Only once in a mile or so, another car would flash by, or some crawling cyclist swerve frantic to his left as their klaxon screamed to him.

Five miles beyond St. Albans, the car stopped; and Havers, in obedience to orders, relieved Lees at the steering-wheel. "Don't be afraid to open her out," called Cranston through the speaking-tube.

Havers acknowledged the order with a salute, and the car leaped forward. Another hour passed. Markyate lay behind them; Dunstable; Fenny Stratford. Lees took the wheel again. The moon had set, and the night-mists were rising. Looking ahead, Cranston could see only a blur of hedgerows racing white under the tunnelling fans of the headlamps. By his side, Rennie, ordered to sleep, breathed heavily in the darkness. He leaned across the man; clicked on the roof-light again; re-studied his map; clicked out the light, and gave more orders: "About five miles on, the road forks. Take the right-hand fork for Northampton. From Northampton to Leicester you know your way. Take it; and wake me when we get there."

Then—the fork correctly negotiated—knowing he would

need all his strength for the morrow, he, too, as had been his habit in other days, slept before battle. . .

To-night, however, as never before battle, Cranston's sleep was troubled by dreams: strange dreams in which he saw the mob gathering round his power-houses; himself, single-handed, facing the mob. And in those dreams, the mob defeated him. They wrecked the power-houses. They drew the fires, the fires which were the life of the mine. He could not hold the winding-engine room against them, nor the dynamo-room. They smashed up the dynamo-room. They cut the electric cables. They tore the ventilating-fan from its shaft. They tore the great wheel down from its tottering headgear. "Maniacs," he shouted at them in his dreams, "maniacs and murderers." But the mob took no heed of him. Maniacally, they went on with their wrecking: while below ground, eight hundred yards sheer under the useless wheel, the waters rose clucking in the sumph to swirl high and higher along the double-tracked haulage-ways; and, helpless, hopeless, his head-roped ponies snorted for fear in their stables at the coal-face. . .

§ 2

Muttering, Cranston woke to semi-consciousness. At his side, Rennie still slept. In front of him, the two fans of his headlights still tunnelled the racing hedgerows. The mists seemed to have cleared. Vaguely, averting his eyes from the light-fans, he could discern rolling grass and black woods standing sheer against a luminous skyline. The woods told him that they had yet another ten miles to Leicester; and he dozed again, waking, abruptly full-conscious, to find the car stopped and lamp-lights at his either window. Rennie was sitting up; the saloon-door open. Beyond it, shivering with cold, stood Havers. "We're there, sir," Havers was saying.

For a moment, looking about him, Cranston recalled his boyhood. They were in Cornmarket Street. Here, almost at this very spot, had been the old corn-chandler's shop, and the little musty office whence he had set out, through the rain-drizzle, to attempt his first coal-deal. Twenty years ago, that; and the shop had been pulled down ten! In its place, he saw a huge plate-glass window, unshuttered, drapery merchandise shewing behind it. He caught himself thinking, "They weren't such bad times, those. . ."

But it was no use thinking about "those times", nor about the old corn-chandler's shop; and, almost without an effort,

Sir Gerald Cranston of Park Lane dismissed them. Ahead of him, close ahead now, lay a bigger, deadlier coal-deal than that first transaction of his boyhood.

"Give me my pistol," he said to Rennie, "and a handful of cartridges. You, Lees, open those front windows. You," with an appraising glance at the frozen Havers, "change places with me."

Chauffeur and owner changed places; and a moment later, Lees letting in his clutch, the Rolls once more gathered way, heading for the North. "It's a straight road to Loughborough," said Gerald Cranston.

Presently, Leicester slid astern. Presently, they passed tents. Presently, unclipping the magazine from his automatic, feeding his cartridges home one-by-one, Cranston spoke again. "We're going to my colliery, Lees. You gathered that, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. I gathered that." Lees, taciturn as ever, volunteered no remark; only opened his throttle and drove on, while Cranston finished his loading, and thrust the charged weapon deep into the pocket of his travelling-coat.

For half-an-hour, for three-quarters of an hour, known hunting-fields rushed by. Then—beyond Loughborough—the hunting-country, the smooth grass and the high fences, disappeared, giving way—as the car, under Cranston's direction, veered now left and now right among the side-roads—to raggeder land, where occasional pit-water glimmered misty in the ungrazed furrows, beyond which, here and there, red chimney-plumes glowered ghostlike among the smoke-fouled stars.

"How much further, sir?" asked Lees.

"Another twenty miles," answered Cranston. "Left incline here."

They inclined left in to a stone-wall country; over a black canal, past blocks of cottages huddling along the road-side; and so came right among the pits. Now, close above them, blurring the chimney-plumes, loomed gigantic slag-banks. Now, from either side of them, they caught the occasional shriek of an engine-whistle or the clatter of cars backing against buffer-stops. Now, here and there on the bumpy macadam, their slowing head-lights shewed them the figures of mufflered men.

"Are those colliers, Sir Gerald?" asked the cockney Lees.

"Yes." Cranston's eyes were on the road. "Turn sharp to the right half-a-mile on."

They turned sharp to the right, past a broken-down sign-post, across yet another canal, towards the long straight street

of a mining-village. "Dazzle your head-lights," ordered Cranston, "and don't hoot. If there's any trouble, obey my orders."

They crawled through the village at a silent twenty, meeting never a soul. The low box-like stone houses, each built in the exact image of its neighbour, were all shuttered for the night. Never a window shewed a lamp, never a doorway a head.

"Seems quiet enough, Sir Gerald," volunteered Lees.

"Too quiet." Cranston's fingers felt for the butt of the automatic; drew it out; laid it on his knee. "Once we're out of here," he went on, "it's a straight three-quarters of a mile, down-hill, to the mine. You can undazzle now; and let her rip. If there are men on the road, hoot; but don't stop for them."

Lees obeyed; and, almost instantaneously, as the car, gathering speed, hurtled down the hill, Cranston saw, three hundred yards away, but already clear-revealed in the outshooting glare of his electrics, the men he had anticipated—four of them, blocking the road. Lees klaxoned; klaxoned again. But the men stood their ground. Now, Cranston could see their faces; now their eyes, now the sticks in their hands. At that speed, twenty seconds, fifteen, ten, would send his radiator crashing among them. . .

Then Lees klaxoned for the third time; and as the picket wavered, darting headlong to the roadside before his headlong onrush, Cranston, unmindful of their curses, saw—and hardly believed his own eyes—atop of the chimney that loomed sudden above his racing head-lamps, wisps of smoke shewing red in the glow of undrawn fires.

"Thank the Lord we're in time," he thought; and, putting the pistol back in his pocket, ordered Lees to slacken pace down the last gradient towards the power-houses.

§ 3

Rounding the shadowy bulk of the power-houses, the Rolls—its cord tyres bumping over uneven ground—halted in the lee of a high brick wall at the foot of the seven iron steps which led up to the winding-room. The heavy door atop of these steps was open; and through it, just as Lees stopped his engine, came Meredith.

The stocky broad-shouldered mine-agent wore his oldest working kit—a frayed suit, a collarless khaki shirt, and heavy boots still gray-green with the stone-dust of the mine. In the

raw light of the electric above the steps, his square moustacheless face shewed gray with sleeplessness, his brown pupils contracted with anxiety. On his hatless forehead, Cranston, stepping briskly from the saloon, noticed a smear of blood.

The pair shook hands. "You must have come a rare pace, Sir Gerald," said Meredith. "I'd have sent some of our fellows as far as the village if I hadn't been so infernally short-handed. Did the picket give you any trouble?"

"No. The boot was rather on the other leg, I fancy." Cranston frowned—an ugly frown that set Meredith's overwrought nerves jangling; and began, one hand on the step-rail, to inform himself about the situation.

"They've given us a breather," admitted the agent in answer to his purposeful questions. "But I'm afraid that's all. After I managed to pacify the last shift, Haines—he's the checkweigher I had that trouble with some time ago—sent a message to say we could get the ponies up in the morning providing we didn't work the pumps. On the whole—some of the men, especially the younger ones, are in a pretty ugly mood—I thought it better to temporize. There's been another message since then. Haines himself is coming up with a deputation at seven o'clock."

"Does he know I'm here?"

"Not unless the picket recognized you, Sir Gerald."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"Well"—Meredith shifted uncomfortably on his feet—"to be quite frank, your brother and I didn't think it exactly advisable. Haines and his gang have been following your newspaper campaign rather closely——"

"I see," interrupted Cranston; and fell silent for a while. "The chap's trying to put the blame for his shortcomings on me," ran his thoughts. "They're all alike, these subordinates. No guts!"

When he next spoke, there was suppressed anger in his voice. "Where can we put the car? It won't be safe to leave it where it is."

"There's a shed just round the corner, Sir Gerald. We could lock it in there."

"Very well. You might shew my chauffeur the way, will you?"

Three minutes later, his car garaged, Cranston, followed by Meredith, Rennie, Lees and Havers, passed up the steps and into the first of the power-houses.

"You've no guard here!" he commented, glancing quickly across the two enormous horizontal compound pistons to the

far platform with the double dial and the upright levers which controlled, almost to an inch, the revolutions of the twenty-four-foot winding-drum, whose half-mile of plough steel rope, now coiled, ran upwards and outwards, through an opening in the roof, towards the shadowy skeleton of the headgear.

"I hardly thought that was necessary, Sir Gerald," answered Meredith.

"Station one before dawn, please. How many men have you?"

"About thirty."

"Where are they?"

"They're sleeping in the electrical room. Your brother and I didn't think it safe to let any of them go home."

"And my brother?" Cranston spoke scornfully. "Is he asleep, too?"

"I believe so, Sir Gerald." Meredith led on, over the echoing metal pavement to where—couched army-fashion under blankets—the various "officials" of the mine, deputies, overmen and shotfirers, slept as best they might round the squat turbine generator that occupied the tiled centre of the second power-house.

Midway between the generator and its complicated volt-meter-board, Meredith indicated Harold. Harold's mouth was half-open. He mumbled as he slept. Walking over to him, looking down on him, Cranston's scorn changed to a contemptuous pity. Harry, "poor old Harry", was too weak, too flabby, too much the civilian for this sort of job. "I'll look round before I wake him," he whispered to the agent; and to his three men, "I shan't want you. Lie down and get all the sleep you can. If you're cold, take some rugs from the car."

Meredith led on again, through the empty compressed-air room, across ten yards of open ground, down more steps, and so into the long open-ended corridor of the boiler-sheds. The three first of the eight fires had been drawn; but at each of the other Lancashire boilers, a volunteer stoker was at work. Every now and then, one of the low iron oven doors opened or closed with a clang as the awkwardly-handled shovel thrust its coal-burden into the red glow under the tubes. "We've had a job to keep steam up," explained Meredith, glancing anxiously at his pressure-gauges.

Cranston, also glancing at the pressure-gauges, merely nodded; and after a curt word or two with the five stokers, passed out of the doorless sheds into the darkness. "Impossible place to barricade," he muttered. "And I don't like the way those hoses run. They're too easy to cut."

Meredith, making no answer, drew a torch from his pocket; and, flashing it, guided their steps round the high iron filter tanks towards the fan-house. In the fan-house, the horizontal pistons, small-sized replicas of those in the winding-room, were at work. By them, oil-can in hand, another official watched the shining shafts as they slid smoothly back and forth through the rings of the compound cylinders. Listening to the even beat of the machinery, to the steady hum of the Waddle fan in its iron casing, Cranston remembered his dream in the car.

"No troubles, Peters?" asked Meredith.

"No, sir. Everything O.K." The volunteer, with a side-long glance at "the boss", went on with his work. Meredith, once more flashing his torch as he opened the iron door for his employer to precede him, asked, "Would you care to inspect the damage, Sir Gerald?"

"Certainly."

They picked their way through the night, past the pay-shed, round the headgear, to the lamp-room. Here, the torch-beam revealed chaos—a wooden door sagging drunkenly on its hinges; and, beyond the door, metal racks overturned on concrete among a litter of brass checks, broken glass and trampled gauzes.

The wreckage, the stink of spilt colzaine that permeated it, infuriated Cranston. "The swine!" he muttered. "The mutinous destructive swine! We'll need the military before we're through with them."

"I sincerely hope not, Sir Gerald," answered Meredith, and, his nerves once more jangling, tried to explain what had happened. "It was the younger men, mostly. Our old colliers have got more sense." Cranston, however, cut the explanation short with a gruff, "Never mind ancient history. How many lamps did they do in?"

"Only about a hundred. We've plenty left, I'm glad to say."

"Where are they?"

"In there, Sir Gerald." Meredith's torch-beam switched to the filling compartment of the lamp-room.

"Well, don't leave them in there. It's too dangerous. Have them brought to the winding-room. And tell your men to see that they're filled. Is that all you have to shew me?"

"That's all, Sir Gerald."

"Very well. We'll go back."

They went back—Cranston rigid with anger, the agent a little sulky—to find Harold awake and smoking a cigarette in

the winding-room. "This is a pretty kettle of fish, old man," began the elder brother gloomily. "What with one thing and another——"

But him, too, Cranston—having dismissed Meredith—cut short, with a purposeful, though not altogether unkindly, "It's not half-past three yet. That leaves us more than two hours till dawn. You go back to your blankets, and get some more sleep."

"But aren't you going to have any sleep, Gerry?"

"No." Cranston spoke grimly. "I'm going to think things out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

§ 1

THE ex-Major of Gunners " thought things out " till dawn came grayly over the pit-country; till the couched forms in his power-houses bestirred themselves to hasty toilets, to breakfasts of cold meat and hard-boiled eggs and tea made in make-shift utensils with water from the boiler-sheds. His thoughts, all through those two long hours, were battle-thoughts, ruthless, barren of any mercy. These mutineers, these would-be pit-wreckers, must be taught a sharp lesson. At Leicester—he had seen on his way through—the Defence Force was already under canvas. In case of need, he would summon them by telephone. That, of course, might mean a little shooting, a few deaths. But what were a few deaths, compared with the preservation of law and order, with the safety of the mine?

Eventually, however, sheer pride preventing, he decided not to telephone, except as a last resource, for outside help; and, Rennie having brought him some breakfast, summoned Meredith and Harry to a short conference in the winding-room.

" You'll keep out of the way as much as you can," he told his brother; and to Meredith: " When Haines and his deputation arrive, *I'll* see them. Alone. In the pay-shed. You'd better bring them to me yourself—otherwise, they'll think I'm going behind your authority. Make it quite clear, please, that I can't give them more than a few minutes and that I won't receive more than four men. After I've dealt with Haines, but not before, work is to begin—— "

" But we could be getting the ponies up now, Gerry," protested Harold. " They've no objection to that."

" Possibly they haven't." Cranston eyed his elder brother as though he had been a stranger. " But *I* have. When work starts, it's not going to start by their favour." Then, turning to the agent again, he went on: " When I've finished in the pay-shed, I shall come straight back here. The cage, the pump-men

and the pony-party will be under my direct orders—the boiler-house under yours. It'll take a dozen men to guard the boiler-house properly. Choose the heftiest you have. Arm them with stout sticks—you'll find plenty lying about. Place them as you think best. The danger-point is the far end, near the fan-house. That should be *your* place. When you get there, uncouple one of the steam hoses and train it so that if there's any attempt to attack either the boilers or the fan, you can give the brutes hell within fifteen seconds. Warn them first, of course, but if they don't clear out at once, turn the steam on sharp. Is that clear ? "

" Perfectly clear, Sir Gerald, and, if we're attacked, I'll do my best. But "—the agent's unshaven jaws set stubbornly—" whatever happens, I'll do no murder."

" You'll do exactly what I tell you, Meredith." For a second, Cranston's blue pupils shewed their frosty fire. " Or else you'll go."

" But, Sir Gerald—— "

" Don't argue. You have your choice. Obey my orders—or go." Coldly, Cranston appraised his agent. His agent—he could see—was in two minds, torn between his pocket and his principles. " Well," he shot at him, " which is it to be ? I've no time to waste ! "

Meredith hesitated a long minute. Then, sulkily, he said : " I'm a married man, Sir Gerald, with three children. I can't afford to disobey you—even if it means breaking the sixth commandment."

" It won't, if you keep your head." The misery in Meredith's words missed Cranston altogether. " They'll never face the steam ; and even if they do, you can aim it low. Now, get to your job. On your way, send me one of the winding-engine men—the most reliable—the first shift for the pumps, and the pony-party. Tell them to bring their lamps—unlit."

Meredith went out, leaving the Cranstons alone. " Weakling, isn't he ? " commented Gerald ; but Harold could find no answer. Gerry's savagery, Gerry's audacity, struck him speechless. " He's no fear," thought the elder brother, " but he's no pity. They obey—but they hate him. . . "

The winding-engineer—a grizzled silent man—came in ; was ordered to his platform ; began testing his levers. A party of eight, in pit-clothes, unlit lamps hooked on their forefingers, followed him. To these Cranston said curtly, " Give your matches and tobacco to my brother. He'll look after them. Don't light your lamps till you see me go to the pay-shed. Then light them at once ; test them ; and stand by here till I come

back. Leave the door open ; and keep as close to it as possible. But keep out of sight. When I want you, I shall want you sharp. All you have to do then is to follow me to the cage."

"And if they try and prevent us, sir ?" The senior deputy spoke.

"You'll follow me—whatever happens," ordered Gerald Cranston ; and, without another word, strode for the door, opened it, and strode out.

§ 2

Already, day was fully come : so that, halting for a moment midway of the iron steps, he could see most of his pit. Above his head, the steel haulage-rope upslanted fifty taut yards to the high skeleton headgear of the circular downcast shaft, from the foot of which the tubway curved in parallel rails of rusty steel over a little hillock towards the wall-less black roof of the picking-plant and the long slope-sided out-jut of the slag-bank. To his right, lay the wrecked lamp-room and the low corrugated-iron building where Lees had garaged the Rolls. On his left, grimed brick walls ran straight and windowless to the back of the boiler-house. Beyond these rose the high smoke-belching chimney, with the wood-sheathed fan-tower huddling like a dwarf windmill at its base. A little away from the fan-tower was the match-board pay-shed, and beyond the pay-shed, dark against the sunlit green of a field, he observed ponies grazing. "Does *them* a bit of good, anyway," he thought. But the little flash of pity passed swiftly as it had come.

Slowly—a bulky figure in his heavy travelling-coat—he went down the steps. Slowly, he began to pace the pit-prop littered, slag-strown ground towards the little inspection-shed at the mouth of the shaft. The shed-door was closed. He opened it ; peered in ; frowned. The double-decked cage was up, empty ; and at that, too, he peered frowning.

Then he walked on up the tubway to the picking-plant.

There were no tubs on the tubway ; no boys at the picking-belts. The silence of the place maddened him. Even if all his plans succeeded, even if he beat these under-dogs and got his volunteers to the pumps, the under-dogs—damn them !—would fill him never a tub, pick him never a ton. For a month, two months, three months, perhaps, his tubs, his belts, the railway-trucks below the slag-bank would carry no coal. Foreigners—Belgians, Frenchmen, Huns perhaps—would reap profit from the Red-and-Black lorry-fleet which his foresight had organized for

Cranston's. "Blast the M.F.A.," he muttered. "God damn and blast them to hell."

Angrily, he turned his back on the picking-sheds. Angrily, he came to the little hillock of ground that humped the tubway, Angrily, looking beyond the roofs of his power-houses, he surveyed the road down which he had motored to the mine. At the top of that road, perched squat against the skyline, he could see the end houses of the village. Presently, from between those houses, issued the little dark figures of men.

Watching those figures, counting them, Cranston's eyes were the eyes of the angry tiger. The tawny hair bristled ragefully on his scalp. His left hand clenched; his right, thrusting deep into the pocket of the heavy coat, closed round the butt of the big automatic. "Murder be damned," he thought. "A man's a right to defend his own."

For another three minutes he watched the oncoming mob. Then, unhurrying, he made his way to the boiler-house; and called for Meredith. Meredith came in his shirt-sleeves. He asked him, looking at the guards, "Do these men know their jobs?"; was told, "Yes, Sir Gerald"; asked if the pay-shed were locked, was told, "No, Sir Gerald"; asked if the hose were in readiness.

"It's ready," answered Meredith. "I only pray God I don't have to use it."

"Keep your head." Cranston laughed—a laugh the agent was to remember all his life. "It's better than praying. The mob's on the road. About two hundred of them. Their leaders should be here in five minutes. I'm going to the pay-shed now. After you've brought the deputation to me, you'll come straight back here and stand by your hose. And remember—you're to use it, in case of need, ruthlessly."

"I'd like to ask," the agent spoke quickly, nervously, "what I'm to do if, instead of attacking the boiler-house, the—the lads make for the winding-room, or the headgear?"

"In that case"—again Cranston's laugh was a thing not to be forgotten—"all you have to do is to stand fast and leave the murdering to me."

§ 3

A moment later, still unhurrying, Cranston strode off, past the fan-tower, towards the pay-shed; and there—turning to look back—caught, through a gap in the stonewalling of the road, his first near view of the mob. The mob were advancing

in comparatively good order. At their head, walked a tall thin fellow in a bowler hat. Behind him, came half-a-dozen gigantic colliers ; behind them, a miscellaneous mass of capped and mufflered men, some silent, some singing.

The song they sang was unprintable—a barrack-room blasphemy. Yet as his ears caught the tune of it, Cranston smiled. Thus, in the older days, had sung other men—men not mutinous but disciplined for war. . .

The smile, however, the memories which had evoked it, lasted only one fleeting instant. " They'll sing the other side of their faces before I've done with them," he thought, as he turned his back on the road ; passed into the pay-shed, and, closing the door behind him, seated himself on the solitary wooden chair behind the long ink-stained pay-table.

Seated there, motionless, his soft hat pushed back from his eyes, a ray of blurred sunlight flickering down on his red-tawny hair from the one high window of the shed, Cranston looked more than ever the angry tiger. It was here—he remembered—here in this very place that he had first decided upon buying the pit. Three years before the war, that ! And now these devils, these mutinous devils, egged on by a pack of crazy civilian Socialists, were trying to rob him of his pit, to wreck it. " The fools," he muttered. " The bloody fools. It's their own livelihood."

Then, controlling his rage, he set his ears to listen, as some wild beast sets its ears to listen, for the coming of his enemy. His enemy was coming closer. Already, through the thin match-boarding of the draughty room, he could hear the actual words of that blasphemous song and the tramp of hob-nailed boots along the last of the road.

Soon, the song stopped. Soon, the hob-nailed boots were tramping off the road on to softer ground. Soon, there fell a silence, broken only by the steady throb of the machinery in the near-by fan-room.

Presently, just outside the shed, he heard muffled voices. First Meredith's. Then another.

" He's in there," said Meredith. " My orders are to take you to him and leave you with him."

" What, alone ? "

" Yes. Alone. And Haines "—Meredith's voice sank almost to a whisper, but Cranston, his ear-drums tensed, could hear every word of it—" if you take my advice, you won't use any threats to him. He's a bad man to cross."

" He's threatened us time and again."

"Not with violence."

"That's as it may be."

The voices ceased; feet moved towards the pay-shed; the door-latch lifted with a sharp click; and Meredith, followed by four men, came in.

"This is Haines, Sir Gerald," said Meredith, indicating the first of the four, the tall thin fellow whom Cranston had seen on the road. "He wishes to speak with you about working the pumps."

"Very well. I'll hear what Haines has to say." Cranston spoke slowly. Both his elbows were on the table; his chin cupped in his hands. From under the tilted hat-brim, his blue eyes stared menacingly. "You can leave us, Meredith," he went on, as the four men took their stand on the other side of the table.

"Very good, Sir Gerald."

Meredith withdrew, dropping the latch behind him; and for a long moment there was silence—the checkweigher, hat-in-hand, looking down on Cranston; Cranston, hat-on-head, looking up at the checkweigher and the three with him.

The checkweigher seemed even taller, even thinner than Cranston had imagined him on the road. His lean face—sallow-skinned, the eyes shifty, and black as the moustaches which drooped ragged over the anæmic lips—contrasted sharply as a foreigner's with the well-nourished bull-dog countenances of his almost equally tall companions. Unlike them, he wore his Sunday clothes, a red tie, and a red rosette in the buttonhole of his black broadcloth coat. But when at last he spoke, his voice, heard clearly for the first time, sounded English enough.

"You'll understand," he began, omitting Cranston's title, "that I'm here both as an official of the Federation, and with the full authority of my comrades. The Federation's instructions you've read. We've not come about them. What we've come for is to tell you—as I told Meredith last night—that while we've no objection to your getting up the ponies, we won't have the pumps worked under any conditions."

"Really?" Cranston's monosyllable was ice. "And since when do *you* make conditions, Haines?"

"I'm speaking for my comrades"—the checkweigher's boots creaked as he fidgeted on his feet—"for the men who produce the wealth on which you and your likes batten in luxury. This lock-out—your hired Press can call it a strike if it pleases—is none of their seeking, and none of mine. But since we're in for it, we're going to fight to a finish——the same as you said

you were going to. You think we're fools; but even fools can read. And we've read what you've had to say about us these last weeks—haven't we, comrades?"

Haines turned this way and that to his fellow-delegates, who nodded sullen approval, and went on. "I'm speaking for all the wage-slaves in this pit, and I hope for all the wage-slaves in this country, when I say that we're not going to throw away our best weapon by letting you work the pumps. The capitalist system has lasted long enough. We're out to smash it. You and your likes have had your day. Now it's our turn. We're the producers, not you. You're only," the shifty eyes scowled, "a parasite."

"That's very interesting, Haines," interrupted Cranston—his chin still cupped in his hands; his blue pupils still staring their menace. "Very interesting indeed. But it doesn't happen to interest me. I'm not concerned with the other pits in the country. I'm concerned with this one. And in this one, let me tell you, my orders go, and yours don't."

For another long moment there was silence in the little draughty shed. Then, savagely, Haines continued: "I'm a Socialist and a man of peace. When you, and the rest of the international financiers were driving your wage-slaves to their deaths, you couldn't drive me. I went to prison rather than serve in your accursed war. And you can't drive me, nor my comrades, now. The war's over, and we've done with orders! I warn you, if there's any attempt made to run those pumps, you'll be prevented!"

"How?"

"By force, if necessary."

Again, the checkweigher's shifty eye scowled. Again, however, the scowl missed its target—Cranston's face moving only the lip-muscles as he retorted with a harsh metallic laugh, "You'll see the inside of another prison before I've finished with you—and some of your precious comrades, too—if you try to stop my officials from doing what I tell them."

"Prison's nothing to me." All the mulish idiocy of the sometime conscientious objector stormed fanatic in Haines's raised voice. "Call the military in if you want to. Have me arrested for sedition—the same as you did before. Only don't say I didn't warn you that if you tried to man those pumps there'd be trouble. That's so, isn't it, comrades?"

"Certainly. That's so."

The three other delegates answered in unison; and Cranston, laughing no longer, uncupped his chin from his hands.

"Is that all you four came to tell me?" he asked.

"Yes." Haines replied. "That's all."

"Very well, then." Cranston's hands gripped the table-edge hard for self-control as he leaned forward. "I've heard your point of view. Now hear mine. We'll let your principles rip. To me, whether you're lousy conchies or lousy Socialists or lousy Bolsheviks doesn't matter a tinker's curse. What does matter to me is this pit. And this pit's my property. Understand that, all of you. I bought it; and I paid for it; and, if necessary, I'll fight for it. If you don't want to work here, you needn't. England's a free country. There's no law to prevent your downing tools till your Federation's spent its last bob and every man Jack of you starves to death. But there is a law to prevent you from trespassing on my property, or from damaging it. If you break that law, if you try to interfere with me or my officials, there'll be, you can take my word for it"—the voice rasped—"something more than just trouble. That's all I've got to say to you. Take it to heart, please. And now, you can go!"

The four men, however, stood their ground—one of them, a great giant of a collier with flax-golden hair and eyes blue as Cranston's own, muttering inaudible threats, till Haines, a little shaken, recommenced, "We've no quarrel with the officials. We've no quarrel with any individual. Our quarrel's with an unjust system, with a system that lets one man, a man like you——"

But at that, before Haines could finish, Cranston's temper, long-leashed, burst all bounds. Terribly—the heavy chair clattering behind him—he sprang to his feet. "When I tell people to go," he thundered, his eyes blazing, "I mean them to go. This pit's mine; and the pumping-party's going to start work in it within ten minutes. If anyone tries to stop them, he'll get a bullet in him. That's final. Now get out of here, all of you. And get out quick!"

For about fifteen seconds, the deputation hesitated; and in those fifteen seconds, Cranston, his fists doubled at his sides, saw red murder. His knuckles itched to smash Haines in the face, to smash the life from between his eyes. Haines—Christ curse him!—was a conchy, traitor to those men of the older days whose song . . .

But even as Cranston's clenched right drew back for that smashing blow, the giant had gripped Haines by the forearm and swung him towards the door. "Chuck it, mate," muttered the giant. "This ain't the time for arguing."

§ 4

The blood-red mist of murder still wavered before Cranston's eyes as he rushed round the pay-table to the open door of the shed. The four men were away, walking fast for the squat bulk of the fan-tower. Instinctively, watching Haines's back, he grabbed for his automatic; felt the butt of it cool and heavy against his palm. "Mad dog!" he thought. "I'll shoot him before he bites."

Then the red mist thinned, broke; and deliberately, dropping the pistol back into his pocket, he stood to watch the last of the deputation disappear between the fan-tower and the boiler-house.

But though the red mist had cleared, though his actions seemed calm enough, Cranston's rage was still on him. As he closed the door of the pay-shed, and made his way, hurrying never a footstep, towards the winding-room, the thoughts in his brain buzzed like angry bees. So the mob—damn them!—preferred a conchy to a soldier, a traitor to one who had fought for them, a man who imperilled their livelihood to one who sought to preserve it. To hell, then, with the mob! They must learn their lesson—learn it from his lead or Meredith's steam.

The mob! Already, from behind the boiler-sheds, he could hear the voice of one haranguing them; hear their sullen murmurs, an occasional cheer.

The cheers quickened his pace. He came to the foot of the iron steps; stood to listen. The haranguing voice had ceased and the cheers with it. But the sullen murmur was growing louder, deeper; and abruptly, hearkening to it, there flashed through Cranston's furious brain yet another memory of the older days. Thus, at Étaples, he had heard unjustly treated men murmur ere the storm of mutiny broke through the camp. . .

Then, ominously, the murmurs died to an instant's silence; memory petered out of him; and, startlingly distinct, high-pitched, audible as a challenge, he heard Meredith's voice crying, "Stand back. Stand back for your lives. There's steam in this hose. If you come a yard closer, I'll turn it on."

One growl, a growl as of foiled wolves, answered Meredith's challenge. "Pray God he holds them," thought the listener.

Again, that instant's silence; again Meredith's voice, crying, "Stand back. Stand back for your lives"; again that one wolf-like growl. Then a longer silence—a hoarser voice commanding: "Leave yim alone, mates. 'Taint yim we're after." Then, once more, the growl—the nearing wolf-growl of the mob.

Now, listening no longer, every fibre in his brain urging instant action, Cranston cleared the steps at a bound; darted through the open doorway; darted into the winding-room.

Just within the door, stood Harold—his cheeks bloodless, his lips twitching under his gray moustache. Behind him, ranged against the wall, were the eight men in pit-clothes, lit lamps hooked on finger, and among them, also with a lamp, Rennie. The Scotsman's dour face shewed grim as his master's own. From his right hand dangled a heavy boiler-spanner. Cranston flung him one glance; flung another at Harry. Harry, too, was armed, after a fashion, with a yard-length of rusty gas-pipe. Cranston rasped at the ten men: "Stand fast. Keep out of sight. Don't make a sound. When you hear me call, come to me at the double. And you"—to the winding-engineer on his platform—"if I ring her down, let her down, sharp."

The winding-engineer touched his cap; the ten signified understanding; and Cranston, with one more glance—a glance all of astonishment—at Harry, darted out again to await, from the top of the steps, the coming of the enemy.

Already, the first of the enemy were in sight. Barely a hundred yards away, ten mufflered figures, stout sticks and lumps of coal in their hands, had rounded the far angle of the fan-tower. These ten halted. One of them pointed his stick at the headgear. Peering hard, Cranston recognized him for the flaxen-haired giant of the pay-shed. Nine figures ran towards the headgear; the giant stood his ground. Frowning, Cranston felt for his pistol; clicked off the safety-catch; advanced to the foot of the steps.

Other men joined the giant; were directed towards the headgear. Behind the giant, Cranston saw a sea of caps surge round the base of the fan-tower. From under those caps came no more growling. Silently they, too, moved—at the giant's direction—lining out between him and the headgear. Puzzled, he advanced another five yards; half-drew the pistol from his pocket; thought better of it. . .

The giant, a white handkerchief on his lifted stick, was coming diagonally towards him. Alone! Cranston, his hand in his pocket, let him come. "Got brains that chap," he thought savagely. For now, fifty yards from him and four deep about the headgear-cage which must be his pump-party's objective, were gathered, silent as soldiers, at least a hundred men; while, at the base of the fan-tower, obviously in reserve under the giant's own orders, waited a special party, armed as the first nine with stout sticks and heavy lumps of coal. Haines, apparently,

had thought discretion the better part: neither at the headgear nor at the fan-tower was any bowler-hat to be seen.

He let the giant approach to within five yards then called, "Halt. That's close enough."

The big collier halted; lowered his stick. Eyeing his flushed face, Cranston read, in every feature of it, an anger that paralleled his own. But for the moment his own anger was cold, calculating—this man's hotter than fire.

"I'm givin' ye yer chance," began the collier; "and I'm takin' me life in me hand to do it. You know what mobs is, as well as I do. I can't hold yon un more than a couple of minutes. Take my tip, and get back up them steps before they do ye in."

"I'll see you in hell first." Cranston spoke low. "This pit's mine."

"I'm not disputing it. I'm no bloody Socialist—like that funk-spot Haines. But I'm an Englishman—same as ye are. And ye threatened to put a bullet into me. That yint fair."

"Fair or not"—Cranston's eyes were on his objective—"that's what's going to happen if those chaps don't clear out."

"All right." Suddenly, sullenly, the big blue-eyed man turned on his heel. "Hiv it yer own way. And yer blood be on yer own hid."

He ran back towards the cage; and Cranston, his hand clenched round the butt of the automatic, watched him melt among his fellows. Then, knowing the psychological moment come, he shouted over his left shoulder, "Follow me, all of you"; heard the clatter of boots on the iron steps behind him; jerked the pistol from his pocket; and went straight for the foot of the headgear.

He went slowly; but in that moment not Eden's own flaming sword could have stopped him. His ears were deaf; his eyes blind to all sights save the sight of the mob ahead. He had no fear of the mob ahead, only a lust, a cold implacable lust to sweep them from his path—with bullets, with the bullets from his pistol. He *must* sweep them from his path before that other mob—the mob round the fan-tower—had time to come to their support; must hold the headgear against them—single-handed if need be—while the cage went down.

For the cage once down with eight men in it—and this was the whole plan—even the maddest mob would hesitate ere they wrecked the winding-room.

Now, a cricket-pitch away from the front-rank men of the mob ahead, his ears undeafened. The mob was growling—growl-

ing as a beast ere it springs. Resolutely, he quickened his pace. Resolutely, he flung up his pistol.

Over the pistol-sight, nearing and nearing, he could see eyes, angry red-rimmed eyes. The growls had ceased. Sharply, he was aware of his brother, of Rennie—one at his either side. His brain froze; froze to the old battle-calmness. He whispered to them, under his breath : " If I wing one, they'll bolt." Harry whispered back, " Don't shoot, Gerry. Don't shoot yet."

Very well then. These dogs should have one chance; one last chance of their lives. He halted, shouted at them, " Make way —make way or I fire."

For a moment, the angry eyes quailed over the pistol-sight. He could read fear in them, indecision. He went another five yards ; shouted again, " Make way. Make way—or I fire."

But though the eyes quailed, they did not give back ; and looking on them, suddenly, strangely, even as his fore-finger crooked round the trigger, there entered into Cranston his last Fear, a Fear as of God, a Fear so awful that just for the thousandth part of a second it seemed to him that his very soul had gone West, that he faced not men but ghosts—the ghosts of those uncomplaining haggard-faced warriors who had passed out at his bidding in Picardy and Flanders. And in that thousandth part of a second, knowing—knowing as surely as though God Himself had shouted it to him—that he dared not fire, dared not slay even one of these men who were his own blood-brothers, and blood-brothers of those uncomplaining ghosts who had passed out, worthily, under his orders, he saw, above the quailing eyes, a grimed hand lifted to throw . . .

Then the hand swung back, flung forward ; its black missile lit crashing on his temple ; and Gerald Cranston toppled sideways into unfathomable darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

§ 1

If such things interest you, you will find the early history of the "Three-months Strike" in the English coal-fields writ large across the newspapers of the period. But you will not find, search the newspapers of those early days as you will, any reference—save an occasional line reporting "no change" in his condition—to that prominent coal-owner, Sir Gerald Cranston, Baronet, of Aldford Street, Park Lane, and Studley Farm, Leicestershire.

For him, humanly speaking, those days never were. Unconsciousness blotted them off the fabric of his life as ink blots some delicate pattern off the fabric of a woman's dress. During that first momentous fortnight he—Gerald Cranston—knew nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing, smelt nothing, feared nothing and hoped nothing; was even as the dead, his soul parted from its body, his body parted from its soul. And even when, after that first fortnight, his soul struggled back to its body, it struggled back witless, fearful as the soul of an idiot child.

To that idiot child, the earth was a place of terror—a bottomless pit where never a pit-lamp glimmered—an underworld of æon-long tunnels down which one's body stumbled eternally through coal-dark waters towards a place where four-footed Things, shapeless, snorted with a terror greater even than one's own.

But to those snorting Things one's body might not win: because, even as one came close to them, a great shaft opened in the coal-dark waters; and down that shaft one was poured —not as water is poured, but with a clank as of chains and a whirr as of machinery—into a nether void.

In that void, dwelt the Faces, the gray and the haggard Faces who gibbered that They were the dead: gibbered till one flew from them—not as birds fly, but with a great roaring as of a storm through tautened wires—high and high to where a woman,

a woman all of scarlet and ivory, leered at one, and laughed and bade one begone.

So that, from her, one fled as from a devil—fled endlessly, crying out on a strange god whose countenance was of polished gold, that he give one back the place of terror, the bottomless pit where never a pit-lamp glimmered. But now, even to that pit, one might not win: for all about it were other Faces, the red-eyed and the angry Faces who gibbered that They were the living, the living whom one might neither escape from nor slay.

At last, after a century and a century, those Faces let one escape; and fleeing from them, through a darkness as of black ice, one heard the voice of a second woman, calling to one, calling endlessly, "Take care—take care." And when one reached *that* woman, when one saw the ebony hair coroneted high on her white forehead, and the deep violets of her eyes, one knew oneself not a child, but a man—a man whose one terror was the Great Light. For in the Great Light abode great torment—a white-hot torment which only the darkness of black ice could allay.

After yet more centuries in that darkness of black ice, the man who was afraid of the light heard voices—wordless voices, whispering and whispering till the torment of them grew greater even than the white-hot torment of the Great Light, and he suffered an agony, an agony as of death. Nevertheless, in that agony as of death abode, comfortingly, his first knowledge of life, of thought, of identity. "I'm Cranston," thought that agonized man, "Cranston."

Then thought went out; and for twenty-four hours as men reckon time, for three thousand years as it seemed to Gerald Cranston, he was aware only of his head, aching to madness, of noises in his head, and lights there, and a net-work of red-hot wires pulsing under his skull. He moaned that nobody must cut the wires, only cool them under the pumps; and somebody cooled them for him under the pumps; till the noises abated and the lights in his head were extinguished, and thought returned, fitfully, in short flashes, to his half-conscious brain. And with thought, there returned in the same fitful flashes, his other senses.

But since, in each and every sense—though mostly in the sense which shewed him that patternless crazy-quilt of fire which was the Great Light—there abode some sense of pain, instinct forbade him to use them; and for many hours—many years as it seemed to him—he was content to drowse back into semi-consciousness.

§ 2

Seventeen days after he had toppled sideways into the fathomless dark, Gerald Cranston woke from his semi-conscious drowse to hear a man's voice saying, "He'll probably come round fairly soon, Nurse. We won't take off his ice-cap yet awhile, and I think I'll increase the caffeine. They're risky things—these slight inflammations of the meninges."

The voice hushed before Cranston could hear more of it; and when he next woke, it was to silence and a darkness no longer ice-black but tempered with some faint and kindly glimmer of artificial light. He asked of that darkness, vaguely, "Where am I? Please tell me where I am"; and was answered by a woman's voice, "Don't talk, Gerry. Just lie still."

He lay still, trying to remember where he had last heard that voice. But reality comes back only in patches to the drugged brain; and for forty-eight hours more, he had to content himself with such patches, with unintelligible pictures of the present, with blurred recollections of the past.

In the present—he found—were Hermione, two women in uniform, a rather pompous man-person who wore gold eyeglasses, the foot of a strange bed, some medicine-bottles, a night-light, and a temperature chart; in the past, mainly, the skeleton headgear of a pit, and a sullen-faced blue-eyed giant who kept shouting, "You threatened to put a bullet into me. That yint fair."

§ 3

Finally—all in a moment, as it seemed to him—Cranston came back to full consciousness and an intelligible present.

The present, he perceived—opening his eyes to a daylight that hardly filtered through some heavy curtains—consisted of a little room, bare-walled and almost empty of furniture, at the opposite end of which, close against the curtained window, sat a female figure in uniform. Instinctively, he called to this figure; and the figure, promptly rising, came over to the bed of which he had just realized himself the prone occupant. "You're a nurse, aren't you?" he asked. The figure answered him, "Yes. I'm your day-nurse, Sir Gerald. How are you feeling this morning? Better?" He answered the figure, "I'm feeling pretty groggy. What's the matter with me?"

His day-nurse—it appeared to him in the half-light that she had a pleasant motherly kind of face—explained that he had had "concussion"; that there was a wound on his head, and

that she proposed to dress that wound. Puzzled, he asked why she didn't draw the curtains before she began. "Because light's the worst thing possible for you," she retorted cheerfully. "Now lie still, and please don't talk."

"But I must talk," said Cranston irritably.

"Well, if you must talk, wait till this afternoon. Your wife will be here then."

The nurse, continuing firmly cheerful, stooped to her bandaging, and, that over, produced a feeding-cup from somewhere behind his head. Putting his lips to the spout, Cranston felt them trembling with fatigue.

"I think I'd like a sleep," he stuttered.

"Of course you'd like a sleep. But you must take this first," said the nurse. Then she wiped his lips; and, soothed by "this", he fell fast asleep.

When he again opened his eyes, he found Hermione seated on a chair at his bedside.

"Nurse tells me you're ever so much better," she said softly, "and that, if I'm very good, I can talk to you for ten minutes."

"Yes. I'm ever so much better. How long have you been here?"

"Not very long. Only about half-an-hour."

"You've been before, haven't you?"

"Once or twice." Hermione smiled. "I'm staying at the hotel. It's practically next door——"

"Which hotel? The Ritz?"

"No. There isn't a Ritz. The Grand."

She smiled again; and Cranston, realizing from the puzzlement in her voice that they must be playing at cross-purposes, went on, "They haven't told me where I am yet, you know."

"Haven't they?" This time, Hermione laughed outright in sheer relief at hearing him speak reasonably. "Then I'll disclose the secret. "You're in the Leicester Infirmary."

"Good Lord! How did I get *here?*"

"Harry brought you, in an ambulance, after—after the accident."

"And how long have I been in this"—the polysyllabic word puzzled his tongue—"infirmary?"

"Just three weeks."

"Three *weeks?* You're joking, aren't you? You mean three days."

"No. I'm quite serious. Harry brought you here on the first of April, and to-day's the twenty-second."

"The twenty-second of April. I say——"

The information dazed Cranston; and for a full minute he could find no more words. Then—the past reconstructing itself slowly in his mind—he asked with a little of his old purposefulness, "I wonder if you'd mind telling me a few things? My memory, somehow or other, doesn't seem quite up to the mark. I got this crack over the head at the pit, of course. But what happened after I got it? I mean——"

"You're not to worry about the pit." Hermione's interruption came swiftly. "Harry told me to tell you, most particularly, that everything there is—O.K., I think he called it."

"That's good." Again Cranston, his eyes on his wife, fell silent, slowly reconstructing the past. There were many gaps in the past—many lacunæ of oblivion which memory could not fill. He could remember for instance—and quite clearly—Meredith's telephone-message to Aldford Street, his own departure from Aldford Street, his arrival at the mine, his interview with Haines in the pay-shed, the mob round the headgear, and himself, pistol-in-hand, sighting at the mob while Harold whispered, "Don't shoot, Gerry. Don't shoot yet." But he could not remember—not for the life of him—either saying goodbye to Hermione, or why, with his forefinger actually crooked round the trigger of his automatic, he had let Harold turn him from his purpose and forborne to fire at the psychological moment when one shot would have cowed the rioters. "I must have gone crazy," he thought, "crazy."

"All the same," he said at last, "I don't understand how everything can be O.K. at the pit. Do you mean to tell me that it isn't flooded?"

"Certainly it isn't flooded." Hermione, anticipating the questions, had primed herself well. "After you fell down, the men got frightened. Apparently, they thought you were dead, and that the collier who had killed you would be had up for murder. So they ran away."

"Then"—there was excitement in the invalid's voice—"we did get the ponies up, we did get the pumps going?"

"Yes."

"Who managed that? Harry or Meredith?"

"I don't know. But it couldn't have been Harry, because he brought you here."

"I see. And the strike—is it settled yet?"

"Harry told me to tell you that it was on its last legs."

"Good again."

Hermione's prevarication about the strike sounded glib enough ; and for the rest of their short interview, Cranston contented himself with listening to small-talk. His wife's voice, his wife's presence afforded him a peculiar pleasure. But for the moment he was too weak to analyze that pleasure. Invalid-wise, he only knew that he wanted things soft, easy ; and that this woman he had married was making things soft, easy—cushioning his existence.

His wife once gone, however, the old habits of mental discipline re-asserted themselves. The gaps in his memory began to irritate him ; and, resolutely, all that long Spring evening as he lay prone in the darkened hospital-room, he tasked his brain to bridge them.

The task made his head throb, so that—despite the caffeine—he slept badly, startling the night-nurse with his subconscious mutters ; but all next day and all the two days which followed, he continued at it. . . Till at last, not with the suddenness of revelation but slowly as some under-exposed photographic plate reveals its picture to the strong developer, the pictures of the past revealed themselves to him whole ; and memory, fitting sounds to sights while every littlest block of life's jig-saw dropped back into its place, recalled both the words which Hermione had faltered to him on his departure from Aldford Street, and those other words which his own mind (or could it have been some Power higher than his own mind ?) had shouted to him as he crooked finger to fire on the mob.

§ 4

And with that last recollection there came on Cranston (even as it had come upon Hermione during those days, which to him were and would always be a blank, when the thought that he might die had cast out the last remnant of her pride) for the first time in all his years, a sense of his own littleness, a strange humility. He had been so strong, so proud, so self-reliant—yet in the thousandth part of a second the Power (surely it *must* have been some Power higher than his own mind) had turned his very strength to weakness, humbled his pride, and smitten his self-reliance to the dust. "I failed," he thought, "and Meredith, Meredith with his, 'I'll do no murder', succeeded. I mistrusted Harry—and Harry, poor old Harry, risked his life for me. Rennie, too!"

For in physical pain and in mental stress (which is also pain) are many knowledges ; and now, as pit-lamps glimmer in the

darkness of the pit, all those many knowledges were a-glimmer in the soul which had struggled home painfully and through great torment to the body of Gerald Cranston ; so that, looking back on the scene at the mine, he could see it not only whole but truly, by the Light of Wisdom.

At first the light of wisdom pained his mind as the light of the sun pained his eye-balls ; and in his pain, he yearned for the self-confident darkness. At first, he shunned the inner truth of his failure to cow the rioters ; fled from it as he had fled from the Faces in his dream ; refused to admit that the moment in which his finger had faltered on the trigger—that moment when the Power had shouted that the men he planned to kill were his own blood-brothers and blood-brothers of those haggard-faced warriors who had passed out as he bade them in the sun-glaring chalk-pits of Picardy and the mist-gray mud-swamps of Flanders—had been no moment of madness, but a moment of supreme sanity and climax of every other moment in his life. But in the end,truth defeated him ; and he realized—almost miraculously—that the Power (could it be God Himself ?), smiting, had smitten him for his own good. " If I'd fired," ran his secret thoughts, " if I'd killed one of them, I'd never have forgiven myself."

Defeat—the thought *was* defeat, utter and absolute, of all his theories about the under-dog—humbled Cranston anew ; and in his renewed humility, he became aware, dimly through the veil the drugs still cast over his brain, that, as his theory of the under-dog, so many another of his pet theories had been based on false premises, on a misunderstanding of human nature.

Yet even so—even when, his condition improving, Hermione's daily visits lengthened from ten minutes to a full half-hour—the newly-acquired wisdom did not carry him beyond the past. In the past—he saw—life for him had been a simple thing, power and money its sole objectives ; self-discipline, the disciplining of others, its sole driving-forces. But what of the future ?

Since, apparently, life was not simple, not a mere battle which one fought, ruthlessly, for the winning of material prizes ; since, obviously, some Power, some driving-force far stronger than mere discipline was at work in the world ; and since, for supreme instance, no thought of discipline or material advantage could have entered Rennie's or Harold's mind when, disobeying his orders, they marched side-by-side with him at the mob—what could the future hold for him, Gerald Cranston, who had hither-to been so certain of his own rectitude ? More money ? More power ? But of what use were more money, more power, when

one lump of coal flung by a fearful hand (wisdom shewed him plainly enough that only fear had hurled that missile whose mark, the nurses told him, he would bear to the day of his death) could annihilate the source of all power, of all money—a man's brain?

These thoughts, and many more of their kind, some trivial, some important, troubled Cranston's secret consciousness all through the first ten difficult days of his recovery. Nor—despite the peculiar pleasure he had begun to take in her actual society—could he find any relief in turning from them to thoughts of Hermione.

For now, analyzing that pleasure, while he listened to her low voice, while he watched her face glimmer pale as some white flower through the semi-darkness of his room, it seemed to him that he had no right to it, no rights whatever in this wife to whom, betraying her for the sake of an unworthy desire with an unworthy woman, he had broken his publicly plighted troth.

"You were saved from murder," said the old Puritan in him. "But from adultery, you were not saved." And if ever a man—though there are many—repented one week's folly, it was Gerald Cranston in those moments, when after Hermione had left him, he looked back, by the light of wisdom, on his week in Paris with Angela Hemmingway.

Yet, because the light of wisdom shone only on the past, and because in that past he had feared love beyond all other emotions, he could not see his repentance for proof that he loved, and had always loved—insofar as love was then in him—Hermione. He could only see, for the moment, that he had gone back on his code of fair dealing, broken the word which—in all other transactions—had been his bond.

Subconsciously, nevertheless, Cranston's repentance—during those strange days when, as he was to understand in the after-years, his very soul changed within him—went deeper than any mere regret for the physical sin he had committed. Subconsciously, examining his marriage, he now began—dimly, yet with an ever-growing certitude—to realize the falseness of the theories on which he had based it, to understand that forcing Hermione (for he had forced her, and by sheer weight of money) into becoming his wife, he had forced her to accept not a clean bond, but a bond of prostitution, of concubinage and chattel-hood; that buying her, pridefully, as men buy slaves, for the tending of his home and the propagation of his children, he had done her a far greater wrong than the wrong of casual betrayal.

"What right had I," thought the new humility in Cranston

" to demand that any woman should bear me children as the brood-mare bears her foals to the stallion horse or the bitch her puppies to the stallion hound ? "

In that mood—a mood that grew darker with her every visit—it shocked him that he should be so glad of this woman's presence ; so glad to know her, even if only in name, his ; so enthralled to watch her hands quiet on her lap and to hear her voice, that soft new voice which he had first heard on the night of his departure from Aldford Street, calling him " Gerry." And from shock—even though the enthralment was not of his body, not in any way akin to the enthralment once exercised over him by Angela—he passed to apprehension. Not to the old apprehension of loving overmuch (that fear, mysteriously, had been burnt clean out of him) but to the apprehension lest, somehow learning the truth (or would the Power one day compel him to tell her the truth ?) Hermione should leave him.

For the better loves, those loves which are beyond mere passion, higher gods than the false images which men and women worship for lack of the true, can be amazing blind ; and now, now that the better love was almost come to Gerald Cranston, he could not understand that this woman who visited him daily had already surrendered herself, in soul if not in body, to this second husband whom she had married, pridefully and unthinking, for the sake of the son she had borne to her first.

CHAPTER THIRTY

§ 1

But Hermione's love for Gerald, as Gerald's repentance towards Hermione, found no vent in open speech. Even when convalescence came and the half-hour visit lengthened to the hour, they had more shyness than joy of one another, more pain than pleasure.

For, with returning health, the business-man in Cranston began to oust the sentimentalist. "I've been lying here long enough," he grumbled, one afternoon in earliest May when Nurse, a little protestant, had half-parted the window-curtains to let in the tempered sunlight. "These provincial doctors don't know their jobs. The sooner I get back to Aldford Street, the better. Even if I can't go down to the office, I can find out how things are going."

Hermione, warned by the "provincial doctors", did her best to dissuade him. Surely—she argued—the City could look after itself; surely health was more important than money.

"But my brain's perfectly sound," he retorted. "And I ought to be up by the beginning of next week. The strike's still on, I suppose?"

She admitted that the strike was still on, but begged him not to "rush his fences"; and in the end he consented to wait a while. For his brain—he perceived—was not altogether in working order. Figures—the gigantic figures it had once memorized with such mechanical accuracy—seemed to puzzle it. In other ways, too, his mind appeared to him to have lost grip. Instead of dissecting a problem, it worried at it as a puppy worries a dead rabbit. "Things," he phrased it to himself, "seem to fuss me."

And his main fuss, for some peculiar reason, seemed to be Marankari. He began to have a premonition about Marankari, an uncomfortable feeling that all was not well with Ibbotsleigh. After all, Ibbotsleigh might have made a mistake about the lode. Mining-engineers weren't infallible. The Anglo-Continental experts had sworn years ago to a similar discovery

—a discovery which had never materialized. Supposing Ibbotsleigh's lode didn't materialize?

The thought of his imported coal also fussed him. Why should foreigners, alien enemies or alien allies, profit by his foresight? Why should the men who had soldiered with him in France and in Flanders be deprived of their livelihood on the hundred-to-one chance of enforcing the theories, hopelessly out-of-date, propounded by a gang of pacifists whose skins they had saved in the War? "The strike's senseless," went on his thoughts, "perfectly senseless. Eventually, they'll have to come to heel."

But the thought of the men coming to heel gave the new Cranston—that Cranston whom the queer gods had at last polished to some semblance of true humanity—little pleasure. The giant's words at the mine, "That yint fair," kept on recurring to him. It wasn't fair—on the under-dogs—this battle in which their leaders used them as mere pawns to capture political objectives. In a strike—why not face the truth?—everybody lost money except the men's leaders. They—"curse them!" thought the old Cranston—drew full pay and a bit over for expenses. Yet was his own side, and more particularly himself, so entirely blameless? In this case, perhaps. But there had been other cases . . .

By this time, he was out of bed, and again insistent on return to Aldford Street. "But you haven't been out yet, Sir Gerald," said the pompous person with the gold eye-glasses. "You don't know how weak you are." "I'm quite strong enough to lie in an ambulance," retorted Cranston with a little of his old grimness. And finally, on the tenth of May, with much headshaking, the pompous person let him have his own way, sending him back, in a special railway-carriage, to London.

§ 2

London, however, only confirmed the provincial diagnosis. Carried—Rennie at the head of the chair and Smithers at its foot, Hermione following perturbed behind—up the unechoing stairs to his bedroom, Cranston found his own doctor, Lidgett, waiting anxiously on his arrival. "Fool's trick, this journey," said Lidgett, who had no "bedside manner" worth mentioning.

Grumbling, he let Rennie put him to bed; and waking after an execrable night, decided himself fit to work. But a specialist, after a short consultation, decided otherwise. "Your mind's at stake"—the specialist told him—"if you use it prematurely, it may go altogether."

"Rubbish!" laughed Cranston; and ordered Hermione to summon a second consultant.

"Your brain's as good as mine," said the second consultant. "But your brain-sheath, your meninges are still delicate. Have patience—rest them." And perforce Cranston had to submit to more drugs, to more bed and more darkness.

Eventually, he succeeded in making up the lee-way his ill-advised journey had cost him. "I'm better," he told Hermione, one afternoon a full week after his return from Leicester. "Almost myself again. Telephone the old lady that she can come and see me to-morrow. And by the way, how's Arthur? I'd like to see him, too."

She fetched Arthur, very interested in Steppy's "scar"; but the child's prattle tired Cranston, and after a few moments she sent him away, saying—as she re-settled herself on the chair at the bedside—"You mustn't over-do things, you know."

Her tenderness confused the invalid; and in his confusion, a little of his self-discipline, of his self-control went from him. "Do you think I'll ever get absolutely well?" he asked.

"Of course you'll get well. Doctor Lidgett says you'll be up the day after to-morrow."

"What's the good of being up? He says I mustn't use the telephone; mustn't see Harry; mustn't dictate a letter; mustn't even read the newspapers. He wants me to go away. Away, if you please, at a time like this."

"But Gerry,"—she, too, that afternoon was a little off her guard—"why shouldn't you go away? Harry says——"

"Tell me exactly what Harry says, please." Cranston's interruption sounded febrile; and coping with it, Hermione grew apprehensive.

"He says they can get on quite well without you," she lied. "He says that everything's all right."

"He tells *you* that." Cranston's febrility did not abate. "But I know better. Things can't be right. This strike must be costing us thousands and tens of thousands. Even if Sandeman's got the Belgian coal through, and the French coal, and the American, we can't have more than half the lorries running. That means waste; and I hate waste. But Harold mustn't sack any of the lorry-men——"

Hermione, mindful of Lidgett's instructions, did her best to prevent the invalid from speaking about business, but that afternoon the diminishing drug-doses had left Cranston's brain more or less clear. "It'll do me good to talk shop," he told her; and gradually, listening to him, Hermione began to understand

how much more than the mere getting of money his business meant to him; how it fretted him to be "out of action", a "crock", a "passenger in the boat". "He's confiding in me," she thought joyfully, "he's confiding in me at last."

But his final confidence struck all joy from her heart!

"It isn't so much Cranston's I'm worrying about," began that confidence. "Harold's competent enough to manage the ordinary routine. But I've got another iron in the fire. Rather a big iron, too. You've heard your father and Cyril talking about Marankari, I suppose?"

"Marankari!" Hermione started. "Isn't that the tin-mine Gordon went out to?"

"Precisely."

"But I thought——"

"That it was your father's private spec. Well, it isn't. Actually, I'm the majority shareholder in Marankari Concessions."

And Cranston, utterly unaware of the effect the words were having on his wife, went on to tell how he had disclosed his secret to Ibbotsleigh, how the lode had been uncovered, the fifty thousand found, and the machinery shipped, ending: "I'm sure your father's as anxious as I am to make sure that the stuff's arrived safely. Tillotson's almost certain to have had some cable. Couldn't you get on to him in the morning—without telling Lidgett—and just find out for me?"

"I don't see how that could do any harm." Hermione, her composure recovered, spoke equably. But there was no equability in her mind. Her mind ached—as once her wrists had ached from Ibbotsleigh's grip—with the sudden searing intuition that her husband's trust in Gordon was dangerous. "I ought to tell him," she thought. "I ought to tell him what happened between me and Gordon." Yet how could she tell him—now, after nearly a year—now when every day brought her renewed certainty that she loved him—of Gordon Ibbotsleigh's attempt on her? "I ought to have told him then," went on her thoughts. "I ought to have given him my confidence before he gave me his. Now—it's too late, too late."

And that night she, too, was haunted by premonitions, evil premonitions which gave her no rest.

§ 3

Next morning, after a private telephone-talk with Tillotson, Hermione's premonitions dwindled. The machinery—Tillotson informed her—had arrived some six weeks since quite safely

at a place called Kano. Thence, Gordon himself had taken charge of it ; loaded it on to bullock-carts ; and started on the journey to the mine. "We ought to have another cable in about ten days, Lady Hermione," said Tillotson.

Hermione thanked him ; arranged that he should come to do her household accounts on the Saturday, and went straight upstairs to tell Gerald.

The good news cheered him ; and from the following day, when Lidgett allowed him up for an hour, she abandoned herself, as never before, to dreams. Her dreams were all of the future, roseate. The future, *their* future, hers and Gerald's, must not be as their past. In it, there must be mutual trust, mutual confidence, mutual—she blushed at the word—love.

"And Gerald?" asked the woman no longer secret in her. "Gerald? What if there be no love in him? What if he care only for his business, only for money?" But Hermione answered that woman no longer secret with the one word, "Angela!"

For something of passion—had not his very infidelity proved?—a woman could win from Gerald. And somehow, sometime, she, his wife, would win something more than passion from him. Somehow, anyhow, cost what it might, even if it cost such a sacrifice of dignity as she now conceived Angela to have made for him, she would bring this second husband of hers to reciprocation of her own desires.

But that time was not yet come. For the present, it seemed to her, she could only wait ; wait and dream of a happiness so far transcending the little happiness she had had from Tony that the mere anticipation of it set her every sense throbbing with delight.

Poor Hermione! who had still to learn that the sacrifice of the senses, howsoever fervently made, can at best be but a first sacrifice on that long chain of altars which lead up to the holy of holies where love, not of the body but of the soul, sits enthroned for woman. Poor Hermione! who had still to understand how hardly the rich may enter into heaven. . .

§

. . . Yet a foretaste of heaven, a glimpse of that holy of holies which is true love, was granted to Gerald Cranston's lady in those last days of Gerald's convalescence, when—at Lidgett's bidding—she and his mother, Tillotson and Harold, her father, Rennie, Smithers, even little Arthur banded themselves in a conspiracy of make-believe whose sole object was "to keep him away from the City."

In those days she enjoyed, as never before, his confidence, his companionship. In those days, she realized—as always in the after-years—her responsibilities towards him. He needed love, this lonely, self-reliant man who, for all his riches, had never made a friend; who, for all his brains, could not understand—even now—that she loved him. Deprived of his business, he was like a child deprived of his toys. Sitting in his Roman garden, driving round the Park, falling in with her each and every suggestion save the suggestion that he should leave Town, he grumbled, as Arthur grumbled, for his playthings—for his telephones, and his secretaries, and his board-meetings and balance-sheets. "Let's drive down to Pinner's Court," he used to beg her, with a certain grim humour which seemed to have developed in him since his illness. "It won't do me any harm to find out just how poor we really are."

But to Pinner's Court—even for an hour—she did not dare let him go. There—she knew from Harold's half-confidences—things, if not at crisis, were at danger. "If he once comes down," said Harold, "we'll never get him away. Besides—honestly—he can do no good. Everything depends on the men going back to work. Until this strike's over, we can only sit tight and hope for the best. Meanwhile, don't *you* fret."

And in her happiness, in her complete ignorance of finance, Hermione did not fret. Woman-wise, her mind concentrated on the one supreme thought of her love for Gerry. If she considered money at all, it was only—the past forgotten—as over-rich women are apt to consider it: despisingly. Money—she told herself—did not mean happiness. Aldford Street, their huge retinue of servants, their two cars, their horses and their hunting-box, her furs and her jewels, had not given her contentment. Contentment—surely—had nothing, nothing whatever to do with money.

Poor Hermione! who could not yet see that a fine man's work and a fine man's love must march hand-in-hand, each complement of each, till the work be accomplished.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

§ 1

GERALD CRANSTON, in those last days, was not altogether the child his wife had imagined him. If he yielded to her persuasions not to visit the City, if he pretended to believe Harold, Tillotson, all those who lied to him for his health's sake, it was only because he knew his brain not yet absolutely fit to take up the task which awaited it ; only because—its old mechanical accuracy almost restored—that brain realized how; granted no unforeseen loss, no unforeseen circumstance, the ship it had conned so long could ride out the storm under another pilot.

That morning, the first Monday morning in a torrid June, which was to see (" Just for an hour, Sir Gerald," ordered the cautious Lidgett) Cranston's return to Pinner's Court, he rose late after a dreamless night, to breakfast, according to the habit of his convalescence, in his own bedroom, and, breakfast over, cigarette lit, thought, " I mustn't rush things. It'll take me the best part of a week to pick up all the threads. The hour this afternoon'll be just a preliminary canter. Meanwhile, the usual walk in the Park ! "

Dressing at leisure, he tested the muscles of his arms, found them flabby ; looked regretfully at his unused dumb-bells ; and decided to have a pair of horses sent up to Town. " Nothing like the outside of a horse for the inside of a man," he quoted to himself. Then, dressing over, he made his way downstairs to find Hermione.

But Hermione, quite contrary to habit, was not in her boudoir, not in the morning-room. Slightly surprised, he rang the morning-room bell ; inquired of the answering footman if she had gone out. " Her ladyship went out immediately after breakfast," replied the footman.

" In the car ? "

" No, Sir Gerald. Her ladyship went out for a walk."

" Did she leave any message for me ? "

" None that I'm aware of, Sir Gerald."

Cranston, frowning, made further inquiries. Hermione—Smithers told him—had gone out " all in a hurry." " She's

probably shopping," he thought; and, after giving her another quarter of an hour, made his way—striding deliberately as of yore—into the Park. There, sitting under the trees by Stanhope Gate, he found Alan. "You must have had a pretty narrow squeak," remarked Alan, eyeing the still-angry scar on his brother-in-law's left temple.

"Yes—they nearly did me in."

"Brutes—these strikers!"

"Oh, I don't know. It was as much my fault as theirs."

They sat talking for a good twenty minutes, after which Cranston resumed his walk. The sunshine, the forwardness of the leafage, the whole life of the Park pleased him. He came to the Row; and, leaning against the railings, set himself to criticize the horsemanship of the "Liver Brigade." Then, slowly, he made his way back to Aldford Street.

§ 2

Hermione had not yet appeared. He went upstairs to see Arthur; talked to him for ten minutes; and returned to the morning room. One o'clock struck; One-fifteen. One-thirty. Smithers came to ask if lunch should be kept waiting. Saying, "Yes—don't bring it in for ten minutes," Cranston began to feel a little anxious. Always, Hermione had been punctuality itself.

Presently, his anxiety increasing, he told Smithers to telephone Rorkton House. Rorkton House had no news of "her ladyship." A quarter-to-two struck. Reminded that he had ordered the Rolls for two-thirty, he went in to lunch. Over lunch, he began to be alarmed. Lunch over, he thought of telephoning to the Police. Supposing there had been an accident? "Absurd," he told himself. "If anything serious had happened, we should have heard."

All the same, when the Rolls arrived at the door, he could not force himself into it. The City must wait—wait until he knew what had become of Hermione. He went into the morning-room; took the newspapers from their rack; tried his brain on them. But his brain would not concentrate. Hermione haunted it. He saw her knocked down—by a motor-omnibus, by a lorry. Saw her insensible, unidentified.

Three o'clock struck. Three-thirty. The scar on his head began to throb. He rang; gave orders for the Rolls to be sent away. That "preliminary canter" at Pinner's Court must go hang. Hermione—the sudden knowledge petrified him—was more important than Pinner's Court.

At last, sick with fear, he heard the front-door bell ring. Then a key turned in the Yale; and at the sound, his anxiety vanished.

As Smithers with a deferential, "Would your ladyship care for some tea?", ushered her into the room, a great joy suffused him; so that, for several seconds, he did not notice her pallor, her exhaustion, the panic behind her eyes.

"I thought you were going to the City," she said, essaying a smile. "Why didn't you?"

"I thought you were going to take me out for a walk," he countered. "Why didn't you?" Then, abruptly wise to her strange appearance, "What on earth's the matter, Hermione? You look absolutely done in. Have you had an accident?"

"No." Her gloved hands trembled at her veil.

"Then what *is* the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Gerry."

"Have you had any lunch?"

"I didn't want any." She unpinned her veil, flung it back from her hat. "I don't want any tea."

"Don't be absurd. Of course you must have some tea." Her face, seen without the veil, frightened Cranston. It looked suddenly old, seared with misery. "You've been crying," he went on. "Why?"

"I can't tell you." She sank into a chair. "I simply daren't tell you."

She sat silent, her eyes wide on him, till Smithers and his satellites brought tea. He persuaded her to drink of it. Already, her panic had communicated itself to him. Already, the scar on his head was throbbing again—violently, painfully. But, watching her lips quiver against the cup, he managed to pull himself together. "Now tell me," he asked when she had finished, "what's the trouble?"

"I can't tell you," she repeated. "I simply daren't."

"But you must." There was a little of the old resolution in Cranston's voice. "After all, it can't be so desperately serious. You're a bit over-strung. This nursing——"

"It isn't the nursing." She looked up at him, and he saw the deadly earnestness of her. "And it *is* serious. Desperately serious. That's why I couldn't face you this morning; why I didn't come back to lunch."

"If it's as serious as that"—Cranston's courage rose cold to confront the unexpected crisis—"the sooner I'm told about it the better."

"But you're not well."

"I *am* well."

For a long while, Hermione still hesitated. At last, with a gesture of despair, she reached for her handbag; fumbled in it; drew out a soiled envelope; and passed it to him without a word.

§ 3

Cranston saw instantly that the envelope was from Nigeria, from Ibbotsleigh, that it was addressed to Hermione, that it had been opened; and, extracting the thin sheets of foreign note-paper, felt his fingers ready to tremble. What, what in God's name could Ibbotsleigh have written to Hermione?

Controlling himself, he began to read. But at first, the pencilled words conveyed no meaning. The words were the words of a maniac. Ibbotsleigh—that sound man Ibbotsleigh—couldn't have written them. No man in his senses could have written them. The thing must be a joke—a madman's joke.

He began reading again. "I shan't ask you to answer *this* letter. There's no post to Hell, luckily. I wonder if Hell's any hotter than this country, where I'm supposed to be making a fortune for that profiteering husband of yours. I hope not. But there won't be any jiggers there. That's a comfort. And perhaps I'll be allowed a spine-pad. Special concession to mining-engineers from West Africa! Rather a jolly thought that, Hermione. Or do you object to my calling you Hermione? Probably. You always were a damn cold woman—even to Tony. I never blamed Tony for going off the rails. However, Tony's dead. So you needn't worry about him. And I'll be dead as soon as I've finished this letter. So you needn't worry about me . . ."

Slowly, the sentences etched themselves into Cranston's mind. Ibbotsleigh must be dead, dead by his own pistol in that lonely bell-tent on the Nigerian creek. "And my mine?" he thought. "My machinery?"

He turned the first page; and, beginning the second, grew aware of Hermione's eyes. The message of her eyes to his was pitiful, imploring. But he drove out the message; read on.

"When I went away, I meant you only good. Even when you didn't answer my letter, I wished you no harm. Do I wish you harm now? My God! I hate you. I hate you ten thousand times more than I hate Cranston. To think that you fooled me. To think that you knew, all the time I was saying goodbye to you—when I kissed you—I *did* kiss you—that Maran-

kari was his, that I was going out to find a fortune for *him*. That's worse than any Hell! However, he won't get his fortune, nor will you, nor will that damned old hypocrite, your father. I've had to wait a long time for my revenge on you all; but now I've got it. Cranston won't find that lode in a hurry, and he won't find his machinery either. I smashed his blasted machinery—dropped it over a cliff—case by case. Fifty thousand pounds worth of it. Not that fifty thousand's anything to him. Still—it'll gall him. These damned profiteers hate losing money. And the lode, you ask? Well, perhaps there never was a lode. Perhaps I made a mistake. Anyway, he won't discover it—not in fifty years. I've taken good care of that. Dynamite!"

The letter rambled off into blasphemy. When he had finished it, Cranston, looking once more at his wife's eyes, said, speaking very quietly: "I don't quite understand. Was this man Gordon Ibbotsleigh in love with you?"

Dumb with misery, Hermione could only nod assent.

"And you knew it?"

"Not till after we were married: not till the night before he went away."

"I see."

Slowly, still on his feet, Cranston folded up the letter; put it back into its envelope; and put the envelope into his pocket. "I see," he repeated; and his voice was almost as the voice of a sleepwalker.

For suddenly, strangely, reading that maniacal letter, memory had disclosed its forgotten picture—Ibbotsleigh, his black eyes hard as agates, his thin lips tensed in condemnation above his cleft chin—Ibbotsleigh staring at him with unalterable hostility as he stood waiting for Hermione below the chancel-steps in St. Margaret's. And at that memory, his heart hardened for the last time. So it was to this—to disaster—to an unforeseen disaster which ("Face the truth!" said the courage in him) might fling the entire financial edifice of his career crashing to the ground, that his marriage had brought him. . .

"Gerry"—vaguely he became aware of Hermione's voice—"Gerry, how can you forgive me? It was my fault. I ought to have told you. But I didn't realize when, when Gordon tried to make love to me——"

"It wasn't your fault." Even in his hardness, he did her justice. "*I* made the original mistake. Not you."

"But the machinery—the fifty thousand pounds. If you'd have known—if I'd given you my confidence at once—then—that night, the night of our reception. . ."

Recollection of "that night", of the night when she had first denied herself to him, dumbed them both: till, haltingly, Hermione continued: "Gerry. My father—this means poverty for him."

"It may mean more than poverty for me," thought Cranston. But aloud, his heart softening towards her misery, he only repeated: "It wasn't your fault. The original mistake was mine."

"How can that be?"

Cranston made no answer. His silence unbalanced her. She wanted to cry. But she could not cry: she could only stare up into his grim determined face. This was the old Gerald—the Gerald she had learned to fear.

"Tell me one thing," he said at last. "Had Ibbotsleigh—*ever*—any reason to think that you cared for him?"

"No. I only promised to be his friend."

"And you never did care for him—except as a friend?"

"No."

Hermione's answer was almost inaudible. His questions unbalanced her, more even than his silence. "Does *he* care?" she thought. "Can Gerry care? Why does he want to know—about my friendship for Gordon? Why doesn't he reproach me—about the money?"

But Cranston's face was still the old impenetrable mask. She could not see, behind that mask, how, in a flash, he had come to full knowledge of his love for her; how, even while he was asking her about Ibbotsleigh, he would have given twice fifty thousand pounds for courage to tell her about Angela; how, knowing her all innocent and himself all guilty, he was almost beside himself with the thought that he might fail her in money as he had failed her in love.

"I mustn't fail her," ran his thought. "I mustn't let this beat me. I must keep calm. I must keep my head."

Then, surprisingly, he laid his right hand for a moment on her shoulder; and said, using that same voice which had once heartened fearful men to the last heroism: "Don't worry, Hermione; and please don't say a word of this to your father. Whatever happens, *he* shan't suffer."

"And you?" His hand had released her shoulder.

"You needn't worry about me, either. I'm just going to think this problem out. Quietly. In my own room."

Speechless, Hermione let him go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

§ 1

NEXT morning, Tuesday, June the seventh, at nine-thirty to the second, Cranston stepped out of his Armstrong-Siddeley, and, scarcely heeding the astonished commissionaire's, " It's good to see you back again, Sir Gerald ", strode deliberately through the wide doorway of Pinner's Court. " For her sake," he thought as the lift shot upwards to decant him at his offices, " I've got to be calm—calm."

In his offices, work had not begun. His clerks were still gossiping across their mahogany desks. One of them had a cigarette in his mouth. Cranston eyed the man—and, as if by magic, the cigarette disappeared. " Tillotson here yet ? " he growled. A panicked office-boy told him that Tillotson had not yet arrived.

" And Parker ? "

" Mr. Parker isn't here yet either, Sir Gerald."

" When they come, they're to come straight to me."

Leaving terror behind him, Cranston passed to his own room. A cursory glance told him that the desk had not been dusted since the previous night, that the three narrow windows had not been cleaned for a month. He rang for the office-boy, told him to get a duster ; hung up his hat, his stick ; and—the desk to his liking—sat down at it, set himself to think.

Yesterday, before reading Ibbotsleigh's letter, he had given himself a week in which to pick up the threads. Now those threads would have to be picked up within twenty-four hours. Marankari—curse it !—had altered the entire financial position. He had not budgeted for a total loss on Marankari. Fifty thousand pounds. Phew ! Poor old Rorkton ! One couldn't very well ask—— And besides, one had given one's word to Hermione that her father should not suffer.

Somebody knocked. " Come," he called. Tillotson, perturbation written all over his bespectacled face, came limping

in. "I'm sorry to be late, Sir Gerald," apologized Tillotson. "Since the strike, one can't rely on the trains."

Followed, a second later and equally apologetic, Parker. Said Cranston, sourly humorous as he eyed the pair of them: "When the cat's away—— I found your mice playing when I got here ten minutes ago. Don't let it happen again please. When's the next board-meeting?"

"To-morrow, Sir Gerald." Tillotson answered, stuttering.

"I gather I wasn't expected to attend it. Are the figures ready, Parker?"

"I have the rough drafts, Sir Gerald. Mr. Lauderdale——"

"Get me the rough drafts, please. And you, Tillotson, get me my private accounts."

The pair went out. "I wonder how much Harold's been keeping from me," thought Cranston, once more alone.

§ 2

Meanwhile, in the outer office, the two secretaries were whispering.

"Looks queer, doesn't he?"

"Can't say I noticed."

Back in the sanctum, a vast bundle of papers in his hands, Stanley Tillotson's remark recurred with some force to Parker's mind. The "chief" certainly did look queer. His jowl had gone lean as a greyhound's. His capable fingers were whiter than a woman's. Half of his left eyebrow was missing. From the place where that half-eyebrow had been, a weal of angry flesh curved up and into the hair-parting. But the chief's eyes, the chief's voice were unaltered—steady, resolute as ever. "Has my brother seen these?" he asked, taking the papers.

"Some of them, Sir Gerald. Not all."

"And Sir James Guthrie?"

"Mr. Lauderdale told me that Sir James was preparing some special figures for the board-meeting."

"Very well. Get on to Sir James; and ask him if it would be convenient for him to come over here this afternoon. Say at three o'clock. And Parker—before you get Sir James, get Sandeman. Tell him to be here at twelve sharp."

"Very good, Sir Gerald."

Parker disappeared; and Tillotson limped back, carrying more papers. "Sit down," Cranston told him. "What have you been doing about my private bills while I've been away? Carrying on as usual?"

"I've done my best, Sir Gerald. But there's a good deal owing. I only had seven hundred in Number One Account on the first of April."

"What do the bills come to?"

"About fifteen hundred pounds."

"Very well. Write out the cheques—on Number Two account—and I'll sign 'em myself. What'll that leave in Number Two?"

"About"—Tillotson referred to his papers—"about three thousand."

"I made it six last night. You've forgotten the quarterly dividends."

"Your quarterly dividends haven't been paid in yet, Sir Gerald."

"What!" Cranston started. "Why haven't they been paid in?"

Tillotson, stammering a little, began to explain. In view of the strike—and as the money hadn't actually been wanted—"Mr. Harold" had thought it better to keep the cash in the Company.

"Damned irregular," groused Cranston. The Company dividends, however, were none of Tillotson's business; and, momentarily accepting the explanation, he switched to Cosgrave.

"What about those stables? Are they finished?"

Tillotson nodded.

"Does Simmons see any prospect of letting the place?"

"There's a letter from him this morning."

Tillotson handed over the letter. Reading it, Cranston frowned an angry, "What's this? The bloke wants it for a school—offers four hundred a year—for fourteen years. Ridiculous!"

"It's the only genuine offer we've had, Sir Gerald."

"All right. I'll think it over."

§ 3

Tillotson limped out, leaving Cranston once more alone. Already, from Harold's juggle with the dividends, it was apparent to him that the financial-signals were set at danger, that money must be tight. "Lucky thing I've got nothing open on the Exchange," he ruminated. Then, turning to the rough drafts of the monthly tabulations which Parker had left with him, he began—perhaps a little less deliberately, a little less rapidly than of yore—to examine their bewildering intricacies. Examining,

he continued to frown. Business—obviously—had gone to hell.

At three minutes to twelve, one of his office-boys ushered in Sandeman. The Northumbrian—a glance informed Cranston—was ill at ease. He had been over-working, too—if one could judge by the tired look in his black eyes, by the tired set of his burly shoulders.

"I'm glad to see you back, Sir Gerald," he began, seating himself, preliminary greetings over, by his employer's desk. "Not, I'm afraid, that I've any good news for you."

"That"—Cranston smiled—"was hardly to be expected. Go on—tell me the worst."

Sandeman hesitated, then began. "It's the foreign coal. The French and the Belgian stuff. I've had to stop shipments. We were losing too much money. Five—seven—ten shillings a ton. More than that on one cargo."

"But how the devil——" For the first time since he had entered the office, Cranston's calm deserted him.

"Easily enough." Sandeman laughed sourly. "The weights were all wrong."

"You could have claimed, couldn't you?"

"I did—and I'm claiming still. A lot they care. They've got our cash and we've got their sixteen hundredweight to the ton."

"And the American coal?"

"Won't burn," said the other tersely. "I've got over ten thousand tons of it in the docks now. We'll be lucky if we can get rid of it to the gas-companies. It's absolutely useless for household."

Cranston heard the tale of the foreign coal out. Listening, his brows knit. Here, apparently, was another unforeseen circumstance.

"It's heart-breaking, Sir Gerald," finished Sandeman. "Positively heart-breaking. And it's purse-breaking, too. I've done all I could. Stopped the advertising—cut down the clerical staff—told the Ford people to hold up the balance of the Markham & Fry lorries. But whatever I do, I can't cut down the rents. And if we once start turning off our trained drivers and our mechanical staff, as Mr. Harold and Sir James suggested yesterday, well, that'll be about the end of things."

"I agree." Cranston, despite his anxiety, spoke easily enough. "And it shan't come to that if I can help it. You can tell the men so from me. Now let's get down to figures. How much do you reckon your show's lost since this thing started?"

"About twenty-five thousand in all."

"Twenty-five thousand!" Cranston whistled. "And what do you reckon you'll be losing a week from now on?"

"A thousand'll cover it—fifteen hundred at the outside. Without the rents, of course."

"I see." Cranston fell silent, biting his lower lip.

"Tell me about yesterday," he asked finally. "What happened? Did my brother and Sir James send for you?"

"Yes." The Northumbrian hesitated.

"Why?"

"Because I needed more money."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand—to pay for that American shipment."

"Did they give it you?"

"They promised I should have it within the week."

"You shall have it the day after to-morrow."

"Thank you, Sir Gerald." Sandeman reached for his hat; marched for the door. At the door, he turned. As he came back, Cranston read a sudden resolution in his black eyes. "I forgot to tell you," he said, his cheeks flushing, "that when I cut down the clerical staff, I cut my own salary down to twenty pounds a week. You can make it ten if you like. Or nothing—till this strike's over. It'll kill me if those Red-and-Black lorries of ours come off the streets permanently."

"They won't. Get back to your job. Don't worry yourself."

§ 4

Though the idea that Sandeman, who had fought so hard for his contract, should have foregone the salary to which he was legally entitled, touched him to the quick, Cranston's face, as he dismissed him, shewed no trace of emotion. Money, obviously, must be far tighter than he had anticipated. His impulse was to ring for Parker; to ask him, point-blank, the amount of the various Bank-loans. That, however, would savour too much of panic.

"Steady," he told himself.

He returned to his colliery-accounts. The colliery, what with one overhead charge and the other, must be losing five hundred a week. Five hundred plus fifteen hundred made two thousand. Add rents. Add interest to that!

The unaccustomed thought, the unaccustomed work made his head spin. He ordered lunch; gave himself a breather; fed; and set himself to sign his private cheques. But the

private cheques, too, made his head spin. His living expenses —never before considered—were, at the very lowest, twelve hundred a month. Three hundred a week. Add three hundred to two thousand. Add rents. Add interest to that. . .

Three o'clock brought Sir James Guthrie, the emaciated Lauderdale in his wake.

"This is indeed a surprise; and a very pleasant surprise, Sir Gerald," began Guthrie pompously. "I had no idea that you would be with us so soon."

"Apparently," Cranston cut him short, "it's high time. Sit down, won't you, Sir James?"

Guthrie, a trifle abashed, took the offered chair.

"You sent for me——" he began.

"To get some information before to-morrow's board-meeting. As far as I can make out from a preliminary investigation, things are not exactly," Cranston smiled, and the smile surprised his auditor, "prosperous."

"No"—Sir James, as Tillotson, as Parker, hedged—"No. I shouldn't like to say that they were exactly prosperous. Still, there's no reason why—with careful nursing—I need hardly say I'm only giving you, for what it's worth, my private opinion—Cranston's, Limited, shouldn't pull through without reconstruction."

"Pull through without reconstruction?" The Chairman of Cranston's, Limited, hardly believing his own ears, echoed the pompous words. "What on earth do you mean, Sir James? Things can't be as bad as that. Three months ago——"

"Three months ago, Sir Gerald"—Guthrie, who had never liked his client, was beginning to enjoy himself—"His Majesty's Government were guaranteeing us fourteen per cent. on the capital invested in our colliery. Three months ago, your—er—Red-and-Black fleet was beginning to pay its way. Three months ago—before this drought—farmers were buying fertilizers. Three months ago, Banks were only too willing to finance sound industrial borrowers. To-day"—the accountant waved a flabby hand—"we have to face an entirely different, an entirely more difficult situation. Perhaps this statement"—the flabby hand signalled to Lauderdale, who passed his principal a typewritten document which his principal passed on to Cranston—"will help you, Sir Gerald, better than any words of mine, to understand that difficult situation."

For a second, the heading of Guthrie's report, "Cranston's, Limited. Rough Statement of Assets and Liabilities as at June 1, 1921", panicked its reader. Then, his brain once more calm

with that peculiar frozen calmness which serves big men in big issues, Cranston began to study.

Studying, the scar on his forehead throbbed till, to Guthrie and Lauderdale watching him closely, it seemed as though he were on the verge of some hysterical outburst.

No outburst, however, followed; only, after five minutes of frightful concentration, the single query: "You say, 'Bank-loans to various branches, including bills under discount and amounts guaranteed by the Chairman and the Managing Director, two hundred and twenty-five thousand, seven hundred and twenty-three pounds, seventeen and sixpence.' Why 'By the Managing Director'?"

"Because, Sir Gerald"—Guthrie's explanation sounded, for Guthrie, strangely hesitant—"in your absence, the Bank demanded further security, and your brother, in consultation with me, decided to give them his personal guarantee."

"For how much?"

"The amount, I believe, was——" Guthrie turned to Lauderdale, and taking the word from his lips, went on: "Twenty-five thousand pounds."

"I see." Once again, Cranston resumed his studies.

But now, studying, his brain was no longer frozen. It raced, that brain—and his heart, understanding, behind the inhuman symbols of Guthrie's report, the utter loyalty of his brother, raced with it.

So Harry, "poor old Harry," had not lacked guts after all. When the pinches came, he had had pluck enough to risk not only his life but the half of his fortune.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

§ 1

It was half-past seven before Gerald Cranston—his mind a crazy quilt of dancing figures—put down his pencil; locked away his papers; and started for home. It was nearly a quarter-to-nine before Hermione, waiting anxiously in the morning-room, heard his curt, "You can serve dinner now, Smithers," as he came slowly down the staircase.

Watching him over their meal, her heart ached with anxiety. He looked weary, utterly worn-out. Yet his few words to her were astonishingly cheering. "Things aren't half as bad as I expected," he said. "We've come through the strike well. Remarkably well! There's a board-meeting to-morrow—and I've had to mug up the figures for it. That's the only reason I stayed so late at the office."

"And Marankari?" she wanted to ask. But the words stuck in her throat. Gerry—her Gerry—had told her not to worry herself about Marankari. She wouldn't worry herself about it. She wouldn't worry him, either. She would just—Harold's phrase—"sit tight", and respect his obvious reticence.

"You'll go to bed early, won't you?" she said over their coffee.

"Yes. I promise you that." Cranston managed a re-assuring smile. "I won't let her down," he thought. "I won't fail her."

§ 2

Nevertheless, all that night, the possibility of failure in the greatest crisis of his career haunted Cranston's dreams; was still on him when Rennie, waking him at seven to the second with early tea, received his precise order: "The car at eight forty-five; and telephone my brother that I'll fetch him from the Metropole at nine."

Bathing, shaving, dressing, breakfasting, running an eye down the City columns of his *Times*, the over-night figures

continued to dance before his eyes. "Steady," he kept telling himself. "Steady. You mustn't panic. You mustn't let Harold see you've got the wind-up."

And Harold, newly-arrived from Leicester, when his brother came up the steps of the hotel into the hall, saw nothing. To him, this Gerry seemed no less mentally self-confident than the Gerry of earlier days, the Gerry whom he remembered starting off, one rain-drizzly Midland morning, to "have a cut at the coal-trade." Indeed, there was more of that twenty-year-old Leicester Gerry than of the post-war Park Lane "millionaire" in the words—uttered as soon as they were alone in the car: "Harry, old man, you must have had a few sleepless nights while I've been ill. I was down at the office yesterday, taking a little look-see. Things haven't been altogether easy, eh?"

"Well"—Harold, not yet recovered from his astonishment at the news, imparted by Rennie on the telephone, that Gerry's "little look-see" had lasted ten hours, felt a mite doubtful of his ground—"well, what with one job and the other. . ."

Cranston laughed—not acridly. "You needn't finesse, Harry," he interrupted. "I saw Guthrie yesterday; and I don't mind telling you that his report saved me a good few hours' work."

"Then you know——" Harry, fingering a moustache-tip, stared at his brother.

"Everything. You've been a sportsman while I've been ill, Harry. A regular sportsman. But I'm quite fit enough to carry my own pack now—and I'm going to carry it. Finance is my job—and trust me, this financial muddle isn't as bad as it looks. That's why—as I told Sir James yesterday—I don't propose taking to-day's board-meeting too far into our confidence. Now listen——"

Harold Cranston listened for ten crowded minutes; and, listening, marvelled as never before at Gerry's amazing pluck. "He's a hard man," ruminated Harry, "but the Lord knows he's a brave one. Too brave. If anything goes wrong with this scheme of his, it'll ruin him."

For Cranston's scheme, as laid before his brother in those ten crowded minutes before they reached Pinner's Court, was simple as one of those cavalry-charges against overwhelming odds which have occasionally altered history. "It's no good thinking about a fresh capital issue," he ended. "Or about debentures. At any rate for the next six months. Possibly longer. This strike'll make investors as shy of coal-shares as a cat of water. What we've got to do—or at least what I've got to do—is to carry my own baby till I can get the public to carry it for me.

Now fire away and tell me what the Bank's got to say for itself. I gather, from their asking for your guarantee, that they must be pretty windy."

Harold—once in his brother's sanctum—fired away for the best part of an hour. At the Bank, too, had arisen unforeseen circumstances—a change of managers, a new chairman, various bills to be renewed, one big acceptance the subject of litigation. " It'll take a year before we get that money," explained Harold ; "and then there's the London lorry-scheme. Bewsher's on their board, you know ; and I think he's put 'em against it. Anyway, when I saw Sir George Holdern, he had a good deal to say on the subject. Asked if we'd reached the profit-earning stage and all that sort of thing. We shall have to pull in our horns there, Gerry. Guthrie thinks—— "

" I know what Guthrie thinks about the lorries ; Sandeman told me." Cranston never batted an eyelid. " But I don't agree with it. Is that all, Harry ? "

" Yes. I think that's all."

§ 3

Cranston, as soon as the door had closed behind his brother, rose up from his revolving chair and began to pace slowly up and down the sanctum. Pacing, he considered many things—but mostly Marankari. Without Marankari, the odds would have just been in his favour. With it—with that accursed fifty thousand to find—they were desperately against him. He went back to his desk ; took the over-night figuring from his pocket-book, compared it against Guthrie's report ; and, ringing for Parker, asked if McManus had advised himself for the meeting.

" There's a late-fee letter just come from Liverpool," answered Parker. " Mr. McManus can't get away. He says he presumes the meeting is merely for routine purposes."

" Very well." Cranston, not unpleased at the information, permitted himself a smile. " I'll talk to him on the 'phone. Put the call through at once."

The trunk-call—miraculously—came through within fifteen minutes ; but answering it, putting his purposeful questions to the stock-broker, Cranston no longer smiled. " Newspaper quotations don't mean much these days," said McManus. " And the market here is as jumpy as a schooner in a gale. If once they find out that *you're* selling Cranston prefs., even though it is only ten thousand of them, they'll mark 'em down to eighteen bob."

" Then don't let 'em find out," rasped Cranston ; and rang off.

The order, first he had ever given for an outright sale of shares in Cranston's, Limited, hurt his pride. But this—this was no time for pride. This was crisis—crisis where no half-measures would avail. He called into the desk-transmitter: "Put me on to Mr. Hartigan, please."

Hartigan, his London broker, confirmed McManus's dictum. "But surely *you* don't want to sell Cranston Prefs.?" asked Hartigan over the wire.

The conversation lasted some time. At the end of it, Cranston rang for Tillotson. "Wonder what he's doing that for?" speculated Tillotson, taking confirmation of the selling-orders.

But neither then, while he was dictating to Tillotson, nor half-an-hour later at the board-meeting, did Gerald Cranston's scarred face betray that he was a man fighting for commercial existence, a man straining every nerve to munition himself for the most stupendous battle in his career: a battle not of days nor of weeks, but of months, perhaps even of years: a battle, moreover—the thought came to him with startling distinctness as, preliminary greetings over, he took his usual seat at the head of the board-room table—which could not, like his early battles, be a fight for mere personal gain; because these co-directors of his, these men whom he had hitherto considered only as puppets, trusted him; because to each of them—to Grayford, whose business he had bought for shares in Cranston's—to Morrison, who had invested the savings of a life-time in "the old firm"—to his brother, to his father-in-law, to Parker—even to Elvery, a poor man for all his dapperness—he, Gerald Cranston, owed the heaviest debt of all—the debt of responsibility.

"I can't let them down either," he thought, as the perfunctory meeting drew to its end.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

§ 1

FOR a young man to break ill news to an elder is never an easy task; and Gerald Cranston, watching his father-in-law lay aside his quaint "bell-topper" hat and seat himself on the opposite side of the desk, experienced a pity that almost unnerved him.

Despite its gray eyes and the fine-pencilling of its age-lines, Rorkton's face—seen in the raw sunlight which streamed in through the three narrow windows of the sanctum—bore the strangest resemblance to Hermione's. It reminded him—that face—of his wedding-day, of the night when he had arranged for Rorkton to join the Board, of his first reception at Aldford Street, of the Sunday when he had first been told of his forthcoming baronetcy, of a hundred days, a hundred incidents about which —at that particular juncture—he had no wish to be reminded. "This is business," he told himself, reining back memory with a jerk. "Ordinary every-day business. Get down to it. Get down to brass tacks."

But before Cranston could get down to brass tacks the Earl, who had remained almost silent throughout the recently-concluded board-meeting, was speaking.

"You will, I hope, pardon me, my dear Gerald," began the Earl in his most diplomatic voice, "if, before we have any talk on our private affairs—I need hardly say that I am more than anxious for news about Marankari—I put a few rather inquisitive queries to you on another subject. As you know, my ignorance of commercial matters is profound. When, therefore, I consented to join the Board of this company, I based my decision not on cold figures but on—forgive the frankness—my estimate of your personal character. You follow me, so far?"

"Perfectly, sir." Cranston, a trifle puzzled at the opening, fidgeted with his paper-knife.

"That estimate, I am glad to say"—the Earl's shrewd eyes were watching the paper-knife—"still stands. All the same—once more, forgive the frankness—I could not help feeling, as I

listened to you just now, that you were—I dislike the term but am constrained to use it—withholding certain information from your co-directors."

His father-in-law paused, as Cranston, suddenly aware of danger, ceased his play with the paper-knife. Then, still in the same smooth voice, he went on :—

"Believe me, I am not pressing you for your confidences. If, in your opinion, there are certain facts about the company which it is inadvisable, at the moment, to disclose to its directors—I shall be quite content to abide by your decision. As I said before—and as I repeat—my estimate of your personal character is still high. All I ask, therefore, my dear Gerald "—again, and meaningly, the diplomatic sentences paused—" is an assurance, from your own lips, that the present position of Cranston's, Limited is—safe."

The old man's words trailed off into a purposeful silence; and for an appreciable while, Cranston could find no answer to them. After all, why shouldn't one bluff? The cause was good, nothing to be gained by taking Rorkton into one's confidence. And yet, Rorkton, by his very simplicity, had the right, if not to the confidence one had withheld from the meeting, at least to a share of it. Rorkton, besides, was Hermione's father. . .

"I think I can assure you, sir "—he said at last—" that, under no possible circumstances, can your name suffer from being connected with this company. During my absence—I won't conceal the fact—things haven't been going over-well. But they're going to be put right, even if I have to put them right out of my own pocket. You see, sir—— "

The betraying sentence did not escape notice; but Cranston, hastily glossing it over, was too pre-occupied with the almost immediate prospect of breaking the bad news about Marankari, to observe the sudden flash of comprehension in his father-in-law's gray pupils. Resolutely now, his mind clarifying, he continued his half-confidences, ending, with a little of his old abruptness :—

"As far as the affairs of this company are concerned, sir, you can put your mind at ease. Whatever occurs, Cranston's,Limited, will continue to meet their obligations. I only wish I could say the same about the Marankari Syndicate."

"For God's sake, Gerald "—the Earl, his mind already keyed to extremest tension, seized instanter on the gravity in his son-in-law's tone—" explain yourself. Why can't the Marankari Syndicate meet its obligations? What's happened? Has the Bank called in our guarantee? Has Ibbotsleigh—— "

"Ibbotsleigh, sir"—Hermione's husband had risen to his feet—"is dead."

"Dead?" The monosyllables whistled between Rorkton's teeth. "Dead? When? How?"

"By his own hand, I'm sorry to say." Quietly Cranston answered the last question. Quietly, hiding nothing of it save Ibbotsleigh's passion for Hermione, he told the full facts. By the time he was through, Rorkton's face had blanched to colourless ivory, and his fingers, his lips, his whole body were trembling as with malaria.

"Then," he stammered, "then, there's no hope. The—the machinery's destroyed. The, the lode——"

"May have existed, or may not." Cranston, moved to compassion, laid a firm hand on his father-in-law's shaking shoulders. "We shall never know, now. And anyway, the point's unimportant. In the present situation, I couldn't afford——" He checked himself; then, confidently, went on: "But what I can do, what I'm going to do, is to see that this maniac's folly doesn't cost *you* a single penny."

At his son-in-law's words, at his son-in-law's touch, Rorkton's body ceased its shaking; and he, too, rose to his feet.

"I don't understand," he began. "I don't understand what you mean. Between us, we—you and I—owe the Bank—how much is it?—fifty thousand pounds. A debt's a debt. And——"

"Quite so, sir. But this debt's mine. Not yours. At least"—Cranston's eyes were steady as Cranston's voice—"I propose to settle it."

"But how?" Gradually—the first shock over—comprehension was coming back to Rorkton's mind.

"By paying it, of course, sir. That's the usual way we settle debts in the City of London."

Silence followed; and during that silence it seemed to Sir Gerald Cranston, his blue eyes holding Rorkton's gray, as though there hovered, at the back of his father-in-law's mind, some question of the most tremendous import—some question which, once put, might rend the whole flimsy veil of pretence he was weaving, and force him to disclose the dangerous truth. But that question was never uttered: for Rorkton, who knew men better than he knew finance, realized that it would lead him nowhither.

"I can't thank you, Gerald"—he said after a long, long pause. "And I can't argue with you. I can only tell you that this offer of yours is noble. Noble! Believe me that, if I accept it, it's only because, because circumstances are too strong for me."

"You take things too seriously, sir." Somehow, the younger man managed a laugh. "I'm only doing my plain duty in taking over your liability. After all, it was on my advice—or rather on my assurance it would only be a formality—that you signed the guarantee."

And with that—for the laugh had cost him a supreme effort of will-power—Cranston, holding out his hand, signified the interview at an end.

§ 2

His father-in-law had been out of the sanctum nearly a quarter-of-an-hour before Cranston's telephone-bell recalled him sharply to the present. Attending to it, he heard first a female voice asking, "Is that Sir Gerald Cranston—thank you—hold on a moment, please, Sir Gerald"; then a man's, a stranger's: "I'm speaking for Sir George Holdern. Sir George asks me to say that three thirty will suit him admirably."

"Thanks. I'll be there." With a steady hand, Cranston replaced the receiver; with a steady hand he drew his watch from his pocket. "One fifteen!" he thought, glancing at it. "That means he must have waited for his branch-manager's reports. So much the better. It'll leave less for me to explain." Then, putting the watch away, and the thought with it, he rang for a boy; ordered his lunch to be sent in; and, lunch eaten, unlocked the over-night figures from his desk, resumed his study of them.

But the figures could give him no more information. Already, he knew them by heart. Already, he could foresee—with that uncanny foresight of the born financier—his exact necessities: necessities not of days nor of weeks, but of months, perhaps even of years.

And that uncanny foresight was still on him when, some hour later he came back from Lombard Street to find Harold waiting for him.

"You've been to the Bank," began Harold, as his brother seated himself heavily at his desk. "Tillotson told me—when I got back from lunch. How did it go off, eh?"

"Not so badly."

"You saw Sir George himself?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything about the Red-and-Black fleet?"

"Nothing important."

"Gerry"—the gray-green eyes were moist with anxiety—

" Gerry, I've been thinking all day about what you told me this morning. Are you sure, absolutely sure, that your scheme's safe, that you can manage it on your own, that you don't want any—any more help ? "

His elder brother broke off ; and for several seconds, Cranston hesitated. Through his mind, there floated a vision—a vision of failure. Supposing, supposing he couldn't swing this deal ! Supposing, supposing that the ship, for all his caulking of it, went down ! In that case, if he accepted Harry's offer, Harry—and his mother, too, perhaps, for Harry, " poor Harry", would never hold his tongue, and the " old lady", once told of the trouble, might also feel herself duty-bound to help him—would be irretrievably ruined. " I can't risk *that*," he thought, " even for Hermione."

Then, hesitating no longer, he spoke his part : " The sooner you toddle back to Leicester, you old funk-stick, the better I shall like it. There's nothing on God's earth for *you* to worry about. Believe me, if I wanted your help or anybody else's, I'd ask for it like a shot."

§ 3

And Harold, believing, " toddled back " to Leicester that night. . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

§ 1

A DAY passed—two days—three days. Days (and nights) for Hermione when womanly intuition slumbered, and only womanly instinct—alert and aching—yearned almost hopelessly to love and comfort this man in the impenetrable mask, this husband whose very self-confidence debarred her from cross-questioning him. Days (and nights) for that husband when—love driving him to work as no lust had ever driven—he forgot even love in the effort to save Cranston's.

To him, absorbed, as some great architect is absorbed, in the immense complexities of his effort, the world outside the City, the folk who peopled it—Rorkton, Alan, Arthur, his mother, even Hermione herself—became merest phantoms. Looking on them, smiling on them, talking with them, he saw—as it were through them—only his pit, his lorry-sheds, his flour-mill, his fertilizer-plant, his machine-shop.

His pit, his lorry-sheds, his flour-mill, his fertilizer-plant, his machine-shop—all these separate buildings of the giant edifice he had created—depended for their stability upon him and upon him alone. If his effort failed . . . But his effort must not fail. These inanimate buildings, buildings his brain had reared in the past, must stand firm, withstand every attempt to shake their girders and their pillarings. And they should stand firm! Samson-like—even though it cost him the last ounce of his strength, the last penny of his private fortune—he, Gerald Cranston, would support them against all disasters. For these inanimate buildings housed men, men like himself, the self-same men who had fought with him in Flanders.

But during those last three fateful days, the thought of his men, as the thought of his wife, was scarcely conscious in Cranston's brain. His brain was a machine, a machine functioning ceaselessly to the one end—that it might save Cranston's and save Cranston's whole.

To save Cranston's whole, to preserve not one part but all

parts of the edifice—only that, said the last of the power-lust in him, would satisfy his desires. Let other men, weaker men, men like Guthrie and Harold, preach the gospel of fear. He, Gerald Cranston, knew that this was no time for fear ; that this was the moment, the one moment in his commercial existence when he most needed courage.

And all through those last three fateful days, courage—the old unhampered courage of his early years—was given back to him. Never, never for one single instant—on the telephone with Hartigan, on the telephone with McManus, on the telephone with Elvery : never, never for one single instant—in his sanctum with Parker, in his sanctum with Tillotson, with Sandeman, with Morrison, with each and every subordinate who came, summoned at speed, to answer his forthright questioning : never, never for one single instant—at Pinner's Court or in Aldford Street, at his bankers' or his stockbrokers'—did Cranston's eyes or Cranston's lips betray their secret, the secret that only a miracle, a miracle of finance, could give him complete victory in this last, most stupendous battle of his career.

Only a miracle ! And in finance, as in chess, are no miracles, no good fairies to move the pieces, no high gods save a man's own foresight to warn him of the end-to-be.

§ 2

It was that foresight, that uncanny money-sense of your born financier which—on the fourth day of his great effort—warned Gerald Cranston, more accurately than any fortune-teller, how—strive as he might, struggle as he might—this last stupendous battle, carried to its ultimate conclusion, could end only in defeat.

Defeat ! If he fought this battle out, the thing, the hideous thing—he realized the moment Rennie woke him on that final Saturday—was not to be avoided. Alone—strive as he might, struggle as he might—he could not win to victory ; could not support, on his shrunken money-shoulders, the full weight of those many buildings which made up his one giant edifice.

Already—it seemed to him as he went through his routine that morning, as he shaved himself, and bathed, and dressed and breakfasted and read the tell-tale money-columns of his news-papers—the pillars of that edifice were loosened on their bases, its girders tottering to crush the men beneath. Already—it seemed to him as Havers whirled him swiftly to the City—he could sense not only defeat but disaster, the utter ruin of all

those schemes with which his brain had busied itself for the last three days.

Yes! Defeat. Disaster. Ruin. If he fought this battle out, the things, the hideous things—he knew even as the sanctum-door of his offices closed on him—might tarry three months, six months, nine months even. But in the end, at the logical last, they were inevitable, inexorable, certain-sure as a problem solved by Euclid's self.

Yet even so, all through that final Saturday morning—as he read his letters, as he signed his cheques, as he ran through his brokers' statements and dictated his provisional acceptance of that melancholy offer for Cosgrave—Gerald Cranston's courage held firmer than the rocks. Only when—lunch eaten; Havers sent home; Tillotson, Parker and all his clerks dismissed for their week-end playtime—he sat him down at his cleared desk to tally-out the remnants which the shouldering of Rorkton's and Harry's liabilities had left of his private fortune, did that courage fail him and the full vision of the end-to-be overwhelm his resolute mind.

The end-to-be—"No use shirking it," he thought wearily—was simple, definite, searchlight-clear. Unless he broke off the battle—unless, following the counsels of weaker men, he cut his losses on the Red-and-Black fleet, sold the London lorries, sold the wharf, let the order-offices, paid off Sandeman, paid off his drivers, paid off his mechanics and scrapped the entire organization which his hundred-and-fifty thousand pound guarantee had founded—he, and Cranston's, Limited, with him, would go to everlasting smash. While even then—even cutting away that raffle of potential loss—this ship he had so long been steering would barely stagger to its nearest harbour, the harbour of "Safety."

For the course to that harbour—Cranston's foresight shewed him—would be long, arduous enough. At best, taking no help, he could only hope—in a year, in two years, in three years perhaps—to win back whence he had started, to re-fit the vessel as she had been before he launched her for those other harbours, the harbours of "Power" and "Money." And yet, and yet—Cranston's memory shewed him—how nearly he had won to those other harbours, how almost certainly, at risk perhaps, yet not at risk of absolute shipwreck, he might still, given but the help, both make and anchor in them.

The help he needed was such a little one. With another hundred thousand—with less than a hundred thousand—he could squeeze through, save the Red-and-Black fleet, save Cranston's

whole. With another hundred thousand—with less than another hundred thousand—he could stand the losses on the Red-and-Black fleet and all those other losses which the coal-strike, even settled, would inevitably bring in its train; could stand firm against every foreseeable disaster till the Great Slump was over and the Trade Wind again booming.

Another hundred thousand! But where, where in God's name, could he find it? Not at the Bank—that source was almost dried up. Not from some other capitalist—capitalists, financing business through times of loss, took first mortgage on their times of profit. Not from the public—the public would have to see Guthrie's figuring. Not from Harold. Not from his mother. Not from . . .

But at that last half-formed thought—a thought which had been haunting him, subconsciously, every moment of his three terrible days—Gerald Cranston put all thought away; and, thrusting the pencilled tally of his fortune deep into his jacket-pocket, determined to go home.

§ 3

Quiet, the uncanny quiet of Saturday afternoon, brooded in Pinner's Court, brooded on the face of the old woman who moved noiselessly on carpet-slippered feet to open its doors for him; brooded over the lone cat at play with her kitten in the trafficless alley; brooded over gray old Broad Street as Gerald Cranston set out, walking, for his disciplined home.

He walked slowly, not with the old deliberate strides, but as a wounded soldier walks; head down, eyes staring, shoulders hunched in pain. Over him, the sun shone. Under his boot-soles, the blown dust of the long drought gritted the pavements. Every now and then, a bus, rolling past, shattered the quiet; and once, as he left the Bank of England behind, an empty taxi crawled by. His impulse was to hail the taxi, to be driven swiftly home, home to Hermione.

The impulse passed, and he walked on, his pace quickening, down shuttered Queen Victoria Street, under the railway arch, till he came to the Embankment. As he walked, his weary brain ceased to function; and a little of joy, of that pagan joy which he had first learned from Angela, entered into him.

For a moment, the river, smoothly translucent in the after-noon sunshine, rested his staring eyes. Then that little joy went from him; and, striding on again, the river and the warehouses behind the river, the bridges, the narrow gardens and the huge

hotels beyond the narrow gardens, spoke to him only of his defeat. This was London—the London he had set out to conquer—the London which, in little over a year, had beaten him, beaten him to seek a coward's safety. Unless, unless . . .

He looked up; saw Big Ben looming above him; saw Parliament towers spire sharply brown against the hot June sky. Looking, memories began to haunt his mind.

Memories! Now it was June's sunshine—then, it had been December's. Memories! Then it had been victory—whereas now, now it was sure defeat. Unless, unless . . .

He came to Westminster Bridge; came, under the shadow of Big Ben, into the statued square; came and stood, his blue eyes still staring, to look up at that low gray-towered church which had seen him married to Hermione.

Memories! Then the grass of the square had shone almost with the green of Spring-time—now, early drought had parched the grass, browned it.

Memories! Then, there had been an awning under the tower; and from under that awning, from under that clock which (strange how one remembered the inessential details!) had stopped at five minutes to twelve—he, Gerald Cranston, had issued with his bride.

His bride! His Hermione! The woman he had married not for love's sake but for the sake of power. Power! And now the power was broken between his hands. Unless, unless . . .

Slowly, his brain once more functionless, Gerald Cranston moved from where he had stood; slowly, strange impulses stirring in his breast, he approached the Eastward porch of Saint Margaret's. Outside the porch stood a man—a gray-bearded man with a wooden leg—selling matches. He gave the man a shilling; passed in, under Caxton's window, to the North aisle of the little church.

The little church was almost empty. To-day, only here and there under the stained-glass which turned the gold of slanting sunlight shafts to emeralds and rubies, an occasional couple whispered, low-voiced, as they inspected the monuments. To-day, no knots of men and women filed right and left into the emptiness of those brown pews; to-day, no flowers garlanded that shining lectern nor the gray pillars which rose to the fretted carving of the roof. To-day—to-day no priest in purple stood, markered book in hands, on the black-and-yellow tessellation of this chancel-paving, saying: "Wilt thou, Gerald, have this woman to thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her . . .?"

Yet to-day—to-day, as never on that other, the words of the

priest rang holy in Gerald Cranston's ears: to-day, as never on that other, he saw their meaning plain.

Love! Aye, the Church—that Church against whose words his whole mind had stiffened as he listened to them—preached truth in their ritual. Only by love could this new world where each hour brought its fresh problem, each day its renewal of the struggle for existence, find salvation. Only by love could he have hoped to discipline that old self of his which had drawn pistol on the mob, that old self whose bodily passions had betrayed him with Angela.

Love! Aye, whatever its faults, in that the Church spoke truth. But for him, the truth—as all truths—had been made manifest too late: so that, in his recklessness, in his witlessness, he had cast away his chance of loving; cast it away for mere lechery and the baubles of the flesh.

§ 4

For a long while, Gerald Cranston's eyes stared at the tattered flags, and the Calvary window, and that altar where he had once knelt with Hermione. For a long while, moving never a muscle, he purposed prayer. But to pray—to pray for pity in this place of his perfunctory allegiance—to pray for mercy in this hour when he faced defeat—seemed the act of a coward; and in the end, his purpose abandoned, he went, slowly as he had come into it, out of the church, and back across the square towards Whitehall.

In Whitehall, too, were memories—memories of his wedding-day. Yet now—now his brain, once more functioning, drove out the memories. "You needn't face defeat," said that brain, "if only, if only . . ."

He tried to scourge away the thought, the thought which, half-formed, had been haunting him, subconsciously, every moment of the last three terrible days; but all the way past the Cenotaph, past the War Office, under the Horse Guards arch, and up the steps into Waterloo Place, the thought, wholly formed, was black temptation. "Why not?" asked his brain. "Why not? It's a fair commercial risk."

At last, momentarily, temptation left him; at last, momentarily, his mind abandoned business. By now, he had come through Waterloo Place and into Piccadilly Circus. There, compared to the quiet he had left in the City, all was bustle. In the roadway, taxis hooted, motor-buses rumbled. On the pavements, crowds jostled him as he strode. He realized with a start

that the matinées were out ; that it must be long after five ; that his mouth was parched for its accustomed tea. "Better taxi home," he thought.

But somehow the thought of home brought back temptation ; and after a second or so, hardly knowing what he did, he turned in at the open door of a tea-shop.

The shop—one of those cheap popular places he had not entered for years—was crowded as the pavements had been. Somewhere in the depths of it, a band played syncopated tunes. Between its many tables waitresses, dressed in neat uniform, hurried ceaselessly with cakes and tea-pots. He found himself a place at a tiny table ; hung up his hat ; gave his order ; sat down, and began—his eyes no longer staring—to look about him.

At the next table sat a young couple—obviously lovers—the girl's hand on the man's arm, the man's eyes on the girl's face. They looked happy, those two. Yet how could they be happy ? They were both, if their clothes spoke truth, poor—poorer than he, with his brains, could ever be, though Cranston's, Limited, went to everlasting ruin.

His tea arrived ; and drinking it, he continued to look about him. All about him, sat other couples, some young, some old, some middle-aged, all, by his standard, poor, yet all, by comparison with himself, happy. They were enjoying themselves, these poor couples—enjoying their cheap tea, their free music. Why ? Didn't they know, didn't they understand—these clerks, these typists, these shop-girls and shop-assistants—that they were of the ruck, of the unsuccessful ? Or did they know, did they understand, did they actually glory in their own unsuccess ?

It came to Cranston, as he finished his tea, that most of these people neither knew nor cared about success ; that they were perfectly contented to enjoy themselves, modestly, after the fashion of their kind ; and it came to him, also, that he envied them all, envied from the bottom of his heart those two young lovers at the next table. . . For their way, the modest way, the way of the ruck and the unsuccessful, could never be his. He—even if, momentarily, he were forced to own defeat—would have to go on, to go on fighting for success until the end. That was the law, the law of a man's own nature which no man could deny.

Yet need he, need he even now own defeat ? Couldn't he, couldn't he even now save Cranston's without . . . without losing his own soul ?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

§ 1

SWIFTLY, hope re-surging in him, Cranston paid for his tea; swiftly, summoning a taxi, he had himself carried home. In Aldford Street, after the bustle of Piccadilly, everything seemed quiet as Pinner's Court had been. "Her ladyship"—a footman informed him—was out, "Sir Arthur" at a party. He told the man, "I'm going to work—see that I'm not disturbed before seven-thirty"; went straight to his sanctum; and there—unlocking the secret ledger from its drawer—taking the tally he had made at the office from his pocket—sat him down to wrestle, for the last time, with his gigantic problem. Surely, surely the problem could be solved? Surely, surely he had overlooked some hidden asset among the remnants of his fortune?

But the secret ledger only confirmed his tally at the office; only whispered to him, more and more loudly as he turned its cash-lined pages, the one word, "Failure!"

Yes! Failure. There, on those cash-lined pages, he could trace the whole record of it—the record of one who, bidding for fortune, jeopardizes safety; of one who, bidding for power, finds all the Powers leagued to outbid him.

Yes! Failure. There, on those cash-lined pages, clear and clear for any mind to see, was written the whole tale of it—the tale of one who forgets that money is not as the grains of mustard-seed; that its increase is not swift, inevitable, automatic, but even as the increase of a fruit-tree, slow.

And this tree, the tree of his private fortune, had come to no increase. Planted in the light soil of speculation, its branches had already withered, withered to fruitlessness: so that here, here among the figures whose growth had once fascinated his eyes, he read not of growth but of shrinkage, not of fantastic gains but of fantastic loss.

Yet even the tale of his losses fascinated him; and for a while —almost as though it had been some other's—he studied it in silence. Thus, thus from the red lines drawn through the

black: thus, thus from the deal with Bewsher, from the deal with Robert Walsh, from the deal with Ibbotsleigh, and from all those other deals, in oil-shares and in nitrates, in spelter and in copra, in francs and in lire, in pounds and in dollars, might a man, a man whose nature bade him fight for success until life ended, learn his lesson; learn that, through his own fault and through none other's, he could not any more save Cranston's whole, unless . . .

Unless!

By now, Gerald Cranston had reached almost to the end of his secret ledger. By now, he had begun to study that section of it devoted to "Share Transactions, Cranston's, Limited." By now, he had turned the page headed "Preferred Shares", and was staring, as one desert-bound stares at forbidden water, at those words, written in his own meticulous hand, "Proceeds, £51,750:19:6: transferred to Trust Account, Gerald and Hermione Cranston on behalf of Hermione Elizabeth Cranston and Arthur Anthony Cosgrave."

The Trust Account! Fifty-one thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds. Almost, that would save Cranston's whole. And the rest? The rest was all about him. Here, here in Fifteen A. Aldford Street. Solid stuff—bricks, mortar, pictures, furniture, gold and silver plate. Solid stuff—mortgageable, saleable. Solid stuff—which, even as the trust fund, one stroke of an ignorant woman's pen would put into his hands for the final gamble. Damn it, humanly speaking, the thing wasn't a gamble at all. It was only a risk, a fair commercial risk.

Savagely, that Cranston who had so long denied love turned to the very end of his money-ledger. Savagely he scanned the list of those possessions he had settled upon his wife and his wife's child. "Why not?" he thought. "Why shouldn't I make use of them, and of the trust fund? It'd be easy enough. Dead easy. Hermione knows nothing of business. She'd sign anything I asked her to. Why not? The thing's no more than a risk, a fair commercial risk. . ."

Only a risk, the fairest of commercial hazards—a hazard which, unhazarded, meant the certain destruction of half his plans; and, hazarded, rightly hazarded, would mean the fructifying of them all. Why not hazard it? Why in the devil's name not? Surely he ought to do this thing? Surely, surely it was his duty, his bounden duty? Surely, surely, surely he must, *must* dare this ultimate gamble—must, at all cost and at any, save Cranston's whole?

Only a gamble, one last gamble—and victory, victory in the

most stupendous battle of his career, would be his. Why not gamble it? Why in God's name not? The thing could hardly be a crime. In law, husband and wife were one. One!

But on that, blindingly, love's fullest revelation came to Gerald Cranston; and, with a great oath, he flung his money-ledger away.

§ 2

How long he had been sitting here, here at his Empire desk with his etchings staring at him from his walls and his books staring at him from his shelves, and his ledger, his open money-ledger staring up at him from his Aubusson carpet, Gerald Cranston did not know. He only knew that, in one final moment of power-madness, he had planned a crime—a crime uglier, in its dishonesty, than Sedgcumbe's; fouler, in its treachery, than the crime of the nameless man he had judged to his death at "Plugstreet"—a crime against love and against Hermione and against that bonny boy for whom, marrying Hermione, he had made himself responsible.

And the knowledge was all bitter to him. He could not stomach it. That he, he who had so prided himself upon duty, should have failed, even in thought, of his duty towards a little child, towards Arthur whose love, whose confidence had always, always and always, been utterly his, was the ultimate humiliation, a poison and an agony in the mouth.

At last, wearily, he spat the poison from him; at last, wearily, he rose to his feet and locked the money-ledger, the temptation of it away. Come what might, he had not betrayed his own. Come what might, Arthur, Hermione, Harold, the "old lady", Rorkton, would suffer no great loss by his folly. Yet others, others—Sandeman and Sandeman's men, all those investors who had trusted in him, his clerks, his work-people and even his house-servants—must suffer by it. Them, saving his own, he could not, could not save.

And that knowledge, too, was all bitter to him, bitter as the draught upon Gethsemane, an agony not of the mouth but of the soul, an agony so terrible that for just one millionth part of a second it seemed to him as though the only escape from it were the escape of Gordon Ibbotsleigh. . .

§ 3

. . . A little of Cranston's agony passed; and, startled, he heard a knock, the click of the sanctum door-handle. Then Hermione's voice asking, "Gerry—Gerry, may I come in?"

Before he could answer, the door closed and she was across the room, facing him where he stood by the locked safe. He could see, even in that first moment, that the eyes under her hat-brim were purposeful; that her hands, ungloved from the street, her lips, the set of her chin, her whole carriage betokened a woman strung to resolution, to some resolution which matched, and overmatched his own.

"You said you weren't to be disturbed," she began. "But I had to disturb you. I had to find out the truth. Father's just told me a little of it; but a little's not enough. I want it all, Gerry, all. I want to know what Harold meant, what your mother meant by the hints they dropped while you were ill, what *you* meant when you said to father that you were going to put things right even if you had to put them right out of your own pocket. I want to know what you meant when you said you couldn't afford to find out whether the lode, the Marankari lode, did or did not exist. I want the truth, Gerry. The whole truth. And I've a right to it! I'm your wife. I've a right to your confidences."

"I *have* given you my confidences," began Cranston. But, in his amazement at her sudden entrance, neither his eyes nor his voice were steady; and, hardly pausing, Hermione went on:—

"You haven't. You told me—have you forgotten?—that Cranston's had come through the strike well. Remarkably well. That's not true. It can't be true. Gerry"—now for a moment her eyes, her voice too, were wavering—"Gerry, please, please be open with me; please, please don't let me go on thinking—don't let father go on thinking—that we've, that I've taken your money, thousands upon ten thousands of it—that we've, that I've made myself safe, and Alan safe, and Arthur safe, while you, you and Cranston's—oh, I know, believe me I know how much you care for Cranston's—are in danger, in jeopardy. Gerry"—her voice steadied again, and he saw that her eyes, for all the resolution in them, were very tender—"Gerry, I only want the whole truth, your whole confidence. I must have that. Don't you see, can't you see that I must have it; that if I thought, if father thought that the money we've taken from you, that my marriage-settlement, this house would save Cranston's, we couldn't, even for Arthur's sake——"

Once more Hermione's voice wavered; but now Gerald Cranston was scarcely listening to the message of her voice. For at last that other message, the message in her tender eyes, had penetrated to the heart of him, telling him, even in his agony,

even in his amazement, all the truths and all the splendours of her love.

And by the light of that love, of those truths and of those splendours, his heart was burnt clean; so that, for him as for her, money had become only a pawn, just a useful pawn in this great game of life and honour which, henceforward, they must play together; so that, when she had finished speaking, he made no answer to her but only asked, his blue eyes tender as her own:—

"Hermione, does this mean that I am forgiven—everything?"

"Since *everything*," answered Gerald Cranston's understanding lady, "was my fault and the least thing of all——"

But on that, with no more words spoken between them, his arms opened to her; and she went to him—as the queer gods had always intended they should go to one another—for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse.

THE END

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